

2 Samuel 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 20. Now there happened to be there a worthless man, whose name was Sheba the son of Bichri, a Benjaminite. And he blew the trumpet and said, We have no portion in David, and we have no inheritance in the son of Jesse, every man to his tent so Israel. So all the men of Israel withdrew from David and followed Sheba the son of Bichri. But the men of Judah followed their king steadfastly from the Jordan to Jerusalem. And David came to his house at Jerusalem, and the king took the ten concubines whom he had left to care for the house and put them in a house under guard and provided for them, but did not go into them. So they were shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood. Then the king said to Amasa, Call the men of Judah together to me within three days and be here yourself. So Amasa went to summon Judah, but he delayed beyond the set time that had been appointed him. And David said to Abishai, Now Sheba the son of Bichri will do us more harm than Absalom. Take your lord's servants and pursue him, lest he get himself to fortified cities and escape from us. And there went out after him Joab's men, and the Cherethites and the

Pelethites and all the mighty men. They went out from Jerusalem to pursue Sheba the son of Bichri. When they were at the great stone that is in Gibeon, Amasa came to meet them. Now Joab was wearing a soldier's garment, and over it was a belt with a sword in its sheath fastened on his thigh. And as he went forward, it fell out. And Joab said to Amasa, Is it well with you, my brother? And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. But Amasa did not observe the sword that was in Joab's hand. So Joab struck him with it in the stomach, and spilled his entrails to the ground without striking a second blow, and he died. Then Joab and Abishai his brother pursued Sheba the son of Bichri.

And one of Joab's young men took his stand by Amasa and said, Whoever favours Joab, and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab. And Amasa lay wallowing in his blood in the highway, and anyone who came by seeing him stopped. And when the man saw that all the people stopped, he carried Amasa out of the highway into the field, and threw a garment over him. When he was taken out of the highway, all the people went on after Joab to pursue Sheba the son of Bichri. And Sheba passed through all the tribes of Israel to Abel of Bethmaaca, and all the Bichrites assembled and followed him in, and all the men who were with Joab came and besieged him in Abel of Bethmaaca. They cast up a mound against the city, and it stood against the rampart, and they were battering the wall to throw it down.

Then a wise woman called from the city, Listen, listen, tell Joab, come here that I may speak to you. And he came near to her, and the woman said, Are you Joab? He answered, I am. Then she said to him, Listen to the words of your servant. And he answered, I am listening. Then she said, They used to say in former times, Let them but ask counsel at Abel. And so they settled a matter. I am one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel. You seek to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel. Why will you swallow up the heritage of the Lord? Joab answered, Far be it from me, far be it, that I should swallow up or destroy. That is not true. But a man of the hill country of Ephraim, called Sheba the son of Bichri, has lifted up his hand against King David. Give him up alone, and I will withdraw from the city.

And the woman said to Joab, Behold, his head shall be thrown to you over the wall. Then the woman went to all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri, and threw it out to Joab. So he blew the trumpet, and they dispersed from the city, every man to his home. And Joab returned to Jerusalem to the king. Now Joab was in command of all the army of Israel, and Benaniah the son of Jehoiada was in command of the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and Adoram was in charge of the forced labor. And Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilad was the recorder, and Sheba was secretary. And Zadok and Abiathar were priests, and Ira the Jeorite was

also David's priest. In 2 Samuel chapter 20, the difficult task of reuniting the nation after the end of Absalom's coup continues, now in the form of another rebellion led by Sheba the Benjaminite. David's grasp upon power at this point is very weak, and in the previous chapter it was already plain that there were enduring tensions between the tribe of Judah and the other tribes. In chapter 19 verse 43, the Israelites had insisted upon their stake in David as their king. And the men of Israel answered the men of Judah, we have ten shares in the king, and in David also we have more than you. Why then did you despise us? Were we not the first to speak of bringing back our king? But the words of the men of Judah were fiercer than the words of the men of Israel. The tribe of Judah however acts as if they have a special claim to

[4 : 50] David, and at the beginning of chapter 20 Sheba starts a rebellion by disavowing any stake on Israel's part in David. If Judah won't acknowledge the fact that Israel has ten shares in David to their one, then fine, Israel will reject David altogether. David is the king of Judah, not the king of Israel.

Many of the men of Israel withdraw from David and follow Sheba instead. The division between the north and the south anticipates the later division in the land that will occur in the time of Rehoboam. Whether or not Sheba is a descendant of Saul, he is a man of Benjamin, and the lingering tensions between the tribes of Benjamin and Judah in the leadership of the nation are flaring up yet again. Nearing the end of David's reign, the tension that framed much of its beginning has reappeared. Things are falling apart. David returns to Jerusalem, yet there is no grand re-coronation.

In fact, David seems fairly impotent at this point. He does not return to the concubines, who, among other things, represent the nation as the bride. They now live as if in widowhood. We might here recall the parable given by the wise woman of Tekoa, where, symbolically standing for Israel, she spoke of herself as if a widow, even while David remained on the throne. David remains the husband of Israel, but only technically. As the chapter progresses, we will see that he might as well be dead, as he is only the puppet king by the end of it. There are ten concubines.

Peter Lightheart suggests the possibility that perhaps we are to regard the concubines as symbolic of the tribes of Israel. The Judahite king never truly goes into the concubines again, as, for the northern tribes, David has ceased to be regarded as their husband. They were bereaved of David some time ago, and while they are guarded and provided for by him, there is no conjugal union anymore. David has appointed Amasa as commander over the army in the place of Joab in the preceding chapter. Amasa had commanded Absalom's forces, but was a worthier man to lead than Joab was.

[6 : 47] As in the case of Abner, David had shown grace to the commander of the army of his adversary. As in the case of Abner, Joab will assassinate a rival. David wants a swift military strike upon Sheba the son of Bichri, much as Ahithophel had advised a few chapters earlier against him.

Unless such a swift strike is made, Sheba could easily get into a fortified city, and his rebellion would be much more difficult to quash. Amasa, however, failed to summon Judah in the appointed time. As Amasa delays, David fears that unless action is taken immediately, Sheba's rebellion may prove more damaging than Absalom's. He summons Abishai, who was, second to Joab and now to Amasa, the most important of his military commanders. Abishai's men are joined by the men of his brother Joab, with the Cherethites and the Pelethites presumably led by Ben-Aniah, the son of Jehoiada. As the story progresses, however, Joab clearly takes priority over Abishai, his brother, even though Abishai was the man with the higher command after Amasa had taken the place of Joab. Joab kills Amasa, his rival for the leadership of the army, in much the same way as he killed Abner. In both cases, there is deception involved. 2 Samuel chapter 3 verse 27 reads, And when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the midst of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the stomach so that he died for the blood of Asahel, his brother. The killing of Amasa occurs in the same location, Gibeon, where the conflict between Ish-bosheth and Abner and the men of Israel, and David and Joab and the men of Judah, had begun in chapter 2.

Much as earlier on, Joab had gone against David's will in order to cling on to his power as the commander of the army, so here he does so again. This time, however, there is more clearly an internal coup taking place. Sheba will be defeated by the end of the chapter, but Joab's internal coup will have proved successful. Later in 1 Kings chapter 1, Joab will be involved in another coup, opposing David more directly. Much as in the murder of Abner, Joab is also killing a figure who strengthened the ties between David and the northern tribes. Abner was the commander of the men

of Ish-bosheth with the northern tribes, and Amasa was the commander of Absalom's men from the northern tribes.

In both cases, Joab's personal interests and ambitions are being placed ahead of the security and unity of the kingdom. Amasa is killed, and then a summons is given in verse 11.

[9 : 14] And one of Joab's young men took his stand by Amasa and said, Whoever favours Joab, and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab. The wording here leaves us in little doubt as to who is actually in charge at this point. The young man is Joab's young man, not David's. Joab's name is placed before David's, and Joab is the man that they must follow, the man that David had just deposed from his office as commander of the whole army.

In 2 Samuel chapter 3 verse 39, after Joab's killing of Abner, David had lamented that the sons of Zeruiah, Joab and Abishai, were too hard for him. He was unable to rein them in, and in the end, they ended up controlling him and the kingdom. David's concern regarding Sheba was realised. Sheba was able to get into a fortified city in the north of Israel, Abel Bethmeachah. This made capturing or killing him considerably more difficult. However, having gone through the entirety of the land, he had not been successful in gathering much of a force behind him. Joab and his men besieged him in the city. As they were preparing siege works in order to break down the walls of the city though, a wise woman intervened in the situation. Speaking of the city of Abel as a mother in Israel, she wonders why it is being destroyed. The city is not in rebellion, but is faithful.

Yet it is in danger of being destroyed for the sake of Sheba. She offers to cast out the head of Sheba, which they go on to do. Her wisdom saves the city. However, we should probably consider the echoes of the story of Abimelech in Judges chapter 9 here. In that story, a pretender to rule has his head crushed by something cast by a woman from a besieged city, which is saved by her actions. We had another reference to that story back in 2 Samuel chapter 11, when Joab instructed the messenger concerning the news to bring to David after the murder of Uriah. Perhaps we are to see Joab as a successful Abimelech-style character, as Peter Lighthouse suggests. As Lighthouse also notes, after Joab returns to the city of Jerusalem, there is a summary statement of David's administration. After this chapter, the rest of the material of 2 Samuel relates to earlier periods of David's reign.

It's appended material and out of chronological order. However, there is a glaring contrast between this summary statement and that of chapter 8 verses 15 to 18. There is no reference to David reigning. Rather, Joab is the first person mentioned in the list. After the internal coup of this chapter, Joab is now the de facto leader of Israel, and David is but his puppet. Once again, we should probably see this as part of the bitter harvest of his sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah.

[11 : 54] In the stories of Saul and David, in 1 and 2 Samuel, the virtues and the vices of power are carefully explored. Saul desperately clung on to power like a drowning man. His relationship to power was illustrated in his relationship to his spear. However, his weakness, insecurity and lack of faith led to his failure to exercise power well and his movement into tyranny. His power was brittle and hollow. David, for his part, started well. He displayed characteristics of both Jacob and his more virile brother Esau. While the virile traits of Esau came with their great dangers of vengefulness and lust, both of which would have destroyed David's legitimacy and ultimately his power, when these traits were exercised by someone who had mastered himself, they made David a very effective, strong and good king. However, after his sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah, David's personal power and virility as the king plummeted, while the power of the brutal and evil, yet highly virile,

Joab rose. After his repentance following Nathan's confrontation, David's problem is much less one of personal sin than of his compromised authority and his personal weakness. Israel needs a man on the throne to keep vicious men like Joab in check, yet David has empowered Joab and weakened himself.

No matter how moral he may be, David is now a weak man and hence a poor husband for the bride of the nation. Israel needs that rare sort of a man who is powerful, virile and confident as a ruler, yet a man who has mastered himself and can exercise his strength with goodness and virtue. Both Saul and David have failed to be this man in various ways, while Joab is a manly and politically effective person, yet evil and corrupt. A further part of the tragedy of the story of David can be seen when we read the story of David against the backdrop of the story of Jacob. In the earlier half of David's life prior to his coming to the throne, we see so many of the themes of Jacob's life being played out in David's life in very positive ways. David is a man of faith who suffers many of the trials of Jacob, yet proves triumphant in them. Yet after his sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah, David's

life starts to take on the character of the elder Jacob, the Jacob who's marked by mourning for his sons and his sons being in rebellion against him. In the story of Absalom in particular, we see echoes of the stories of a number of Jacob's sons and the tragedies concerning them. Levi and Simeon, in vengeance for the rape of their sister in Genesis chapter 34, kill a king's son and all who are associated with him. Absalom avenges himself on Amnon after his rape of Tamar in much the same way. Absalom is also like Reuben, who sleeps with his father's concubine Bilhah. Absalom sleeps with the concubines of David. Absalom is like Judah, the one who has three sons and a daughter called Tamar who loses his sons prematurely and is cut off from the rest of the family. And then, of course, Absalom is like Joseph. He's the son whose death or apparent death absolutely devastates his father, so that his father seems to go down to the grave in mourning. The harvest of sin is very, very bitter. A question to consider. Looking back at the story of Joab, can you trace the steps that led him to this position of dominance in Israel?