

2 Samuel 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Samuel chapter 3 There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David, and David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker.

And sons were born to David at Hebron. His firstborn was Amnon, of Ahinoam of Jezreel, and his second Kiliab of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel, and the third Absalom the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Gesher, and the fourth Adonijah the son of Haggith, and the fifth Shephethiah the son of Abital, and the sixth Ithriam of Eglah, David's wife.

These were born to David in Hebron. While there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul. Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah.

And Ish-bosheth said to Abner, Why have you gone in to my father's concubine? And Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, Am I a dog's head of Judah? To this day I keep showing steadfast love to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers and to his friends, and have not given you into the hand of David.

And yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman. God do so to Abner and more also, if I do not accomplish for David what the Lord has sworn to him, to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul, and set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba.

[1 : 21] And Ish-bosheth could not answer Abner another word, because he feared him. And Abner sent messengers to David on his behalf, saying, To whom does the land belong? Make your covenant with me, and behold, my hand shall be with you to bring over all Israel to you.

And he said, Good, I will make a covenant with you, but one thing I require of you, that is, you shall not see my face unless you first bring Michal, Saul's daughter, when you come to see my face.

Then David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, saying, Give me my wife Michal, for whom I paid the bridal price of a hundred foreskins of the Philistines. And Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband Paltiel, the son of Laish.

But her husband went with her, weeping after her all the way to Bahorim. Then Abner said to him, Go return. And he returned. And Abner conferred with the elders of Israel, saying, For some time past you have been seeking David as king over you.

Now then, bring it about, for the Lord has promised David, saying, By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.

[2 : 27] Abner also spoke to Benjamin. And then Abner went to tell David at Hebron all that Israel and the whole house of Benjamin thought good to do. When Abner came with twenty men to David at Hebron, David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him.

And Abner said to David, I will arise and go, and will gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your heart desires.

So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace. Just then the servants of David arrived with Joab from a raid, bringing much spoil with them. But Abner was not with David at Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace.

When Joab and all the army that was with him came, it was told Joab, Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has let him go, and he has gone in peace. Then Joab went to the king and said, What have you done?

Behold, Abner came to you. Why is it that you have sent him away, so that he is gone? You know that Abner the son of Ner came to deceive you, and to know you are going out and you are coming in, and to know all that you are doing.

[3 : 32] When Joab came out from David's presence, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the cistern of Sirah, but David did not know about it. 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.

Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the Lord for the blood of Abner the son of Ner. May it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father's house, and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge, or who is leprous, who holds a spindle, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread.

So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner, because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon. Then David said to Joab, and to all the people who were with him, tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and mourn before Abner.

And King David followed the beer. They buried Abner at Hebron, and the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. And the king lamented for Abner, saying, Should Abner die as a fool dies?

Your hands were not bound, your feet were not fettered. As one falls before the wicked, you have fallen. And all the people wept again over him. Then all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was yet day.

[4 : 54] But David swore, saying, God do so to me and more also if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down. And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them, as everything that the king did pleased all the people.

So all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's will to put to death Abner the son of Ner. And the king said to his servants, Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?

And I was gentle today, though anointed king. These men, the sons of Zeruiah, are more severe than I. The Lord repay the evildoer according to his wickedness.

In 2 Samuel chapter 3, we read of the continuing war between the house of Saul and the house of David. This war had gotten off to a bitter start when Abner had killed Asahel, the brother of Joab, leaving Joab, the commander of David's men, with a personal vendetta against the commander of Ish-bosheth's men.

We also see that David is starting to make political alliances through marriage. Forging alliances through marriage was a great temptation for the king, and it's one of the reasons it was forbidden in Deuteronomy chapter 17.

[6 : 02] It was also a more general temptation for Israel within the land to intermarry in order to make their position more secure. By marrying women from important regions and families, David is getting traction in his struggle against Saul.

We might think of this as one of the fronts on which the war is being fought. For instance, marrying Meacah, the daughter of Talmi, king of Gesher, might have given David some advantage within the region of the Transjordan, where Ish-bosheth's kingdom was primarily based.

However, in the long term, having many wives with many sons from the different wives proved to be a recipe for conflict. David had a fractured family ripe for rivalry, something that became most pronounced when the question of succession became more prominent.

Abner, who had been the commander of the army of Saul, was the kingmaker. It was Abner who was the real power behind Ish-bosheth's throne. Ish-bosheth was a weak man anyway, and the more that the house of Saul was at war with the house of David, the more powerful Abner became as the war leader.

Abner, on account of his prominence and his power and his attachment with the house of Saul, probably could have become the king himself had he wanted to. Perhaps recognising the potential power of Abner, Ish-bosheth makes a false accusation against him.

[7 : 14] We're never told whether it's true or not, but Ish-bosheth accuses Abner of taking his father's concubine. Why would this matter? The new king inherited the harem of his predecessor.

It was one of the signs of his power. In 2 Samuel 12, verse 8, we read of David, And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah.

A person having relations with one of the king's concubines or wives was a matter of great concern. It was one of the ways in which usurpers and pretenders and others could make power plays.

We see examples of this in the story of Absalom, who slept with his father's concubines in the sight of Israel. Another example is Adonijah, who after the death of his father David, requested Abishag the Tunamite as his wife.

Solomon recognised that he was really trying to make a move for the throne. Whether or not Abner was guilty of what Ish-bosheth accused him of, we might recognise God's sovereignty in causing a rift between the two men.

[8 : 13] A breach between these two men was very serious, because without the two of them, the kingdom was very weak. It was Ish-bosheth that gave legitimacy and it was Abner that gave the power. By himself, Ish-bosheth was a very weak man and when Abner resisted him, he wasn't able to stop him.

Abner sends messengers to David and offers to give him the whole kingdom in his hand. As proof that Abner has the power to do this, David wants him to send him Michael, his wife who had been taken from him by Saul.

Getting Michael back will prove Abner's capacity to deliver Israel into David's hands. Michael is also important as she represents Saul's house. David sends messengers to Ish-bosheth demanding the return of Michael.

Abner presumably shows that he is the power behind the throne by getting Ish-bosheth to comply. Ish-bosheth is weak and capitulating to David's strong demands and he seems to be losing the women in his household.

His accusation to Abner concerning Risper and now sending his sister to his rival David suggests that he can't perform one of the most basic tasks required of him as king in guarding the women of his house from rivals.

[9 : 20] Michael has been married to someone else and this might make us wonder whether David is breaking the commandment of Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 1-4. While David did not divorce her the situation is not clearly legitimate.

At least while it is most likely legitimate it is very murky. Why are we told about Paltiel? Paltiel clearly dearly loves Michael. Michael was the one woman in Old Testament narrative said to love a man David.

She had acted bravely on David's behalf delivering him from her father Saul. However her father had used her as a political pawn designed to control David. David's demand for her return is likely shot through with similar concerns.

She is a daughter of Saul who could bear sons who could be a threat on account of their association with Saul's house. It is quite likely that Michael is being instrumentalised to some degree or other in this situation and the pitiful weeping of Paltiel might give a sense of what is taking place.

Abner confers with the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites encouraging them to turn over their loyalties to David. Benjamin was Saul and Ish-bosheth's tribe. If he could get them to submit to David the other tribes would almost certainly follow.

[10 : 31] Abner brings twenty men to David we should remember at the end of the preceding chapter in verses thirty to thirty two that twenty men had been killed. perhaps Abner is intentionally making up for these men.

Abner makes a covenant with David and promises to gather Israel to David to make a covenant with him. Joab hears however that Abner has come to David. He is a violent and a vengeful man.

On account of his brother Asahel's death he has a family vendetta against Abner. As we saw in the preceding chapter Abner went out of his way to avoid having such a vendetta and only killed Asahel when he obstinately refused to stop pursuing him.

Abner was entirely in his rights to kill Asahel in war and this was not legitimate grounds for a vendetta. Furthermore Abner is arguably the most powerful man in Israel a commander with decades of experience the power behind the throne of Israel and someone who would likely expect to be the commander of the entire army on account of his service to David.

Appointing Abner to such a position would be a strategic way to heal the breach in the kingdom. So not only is there the personal vendetta he is a very obvious rival to Joab. Joab is a shrewd and ambitious man and his motives in this situation are muddy at best.

[11 : 44] Was he acting for self-advancement under the cover of the vendetta? It's entirely possible. There is also the consideration that Joab knew that Abner was a powerful player who had already betrayed one king and as a member of the house of David Joab wants to eliminate him as a threat to David once he has served his purpose in returning Michael and bringing the tribes over to David's side.

Joab claims to David that Abner has been spying on him although there is nothing whatsoever that suggests that he was doing so. This is most likely the second false accusation levelled against Abner in this chapter by people fearful of his power.

Joab deceptively kills Abner. Abner struck Asahel in the belly and killed him. Now Joab strikes Abner in the belly and kills him. This is not the only time that Joab kills a rival nor is it the only time that he does so using deception.

He does the same thing to Amasa in chapter 20. This all puts David in a highly compromised position. Joab is his right hand man of many years. He's David's nephew.

Who is going to believe that David is innocent of Abner's blood? It really looks like David has gotten Joab to perform a convenient assassination for him. David curses Joab and his father's house for his action, not just Joab.

[12 : 59] Abishai is included as he seems to have been involved in some way. The curse is that the house will always have a weak, poor, outcast person or victim of violence within it.

Commentators differ on the meaning of the expression translated who holds a spindle in the ESV. Many believe that it refers to an effeminate man or a man too weak for anything but domestic work, while others believe it refers to a crutch, suggesting lameness.

Joab has not honoured David's peace. Throughout David's reign, Joab is the serpent in his garden, and he never effectively deals with him. David leads the people in mourning for Abner, lamenting him aloud.

He refuses food and declares his deep sorrow. Whatever David's actual feelings about Abner, and I'm sure that these feelings were largely genuine, the really urgent matter here is David's public image.

Joab has deeply compromised! David. However, David fails to deal with him decisively, by removing him from his office or putting him to death. Perhaps Joab simply has too much power to be removed, or perhaps he's just too important or useful a figure to sacrifice to the demands of justice.

[14 : 07] Did David know that Joab had acted in part out of a sense of David's own interests, and perhaps was reluctant to remove him from office in repayment for what had been intended as a good deed on his behalf?

The motives of all parties here are incredibly muddy, and were probably unclear to themselves too. Whatever the case, David's failure to deal effectively with Joab caused him great problems and cast doubts over just how seriously he took the killing of Abner.

Joab's murder of Abner also left lingering animosity between the houses of Saul and David. David's kingdom is built on less than certain foundations, and some cracks will start to emerge before long, both on account of the multitude of his wives, and on account of his failure to deal with Joab.

A question to consider. In many respects, Joab represents the serpentine shrewdness of a man who loves to play cynical and cruel power games. While David publicly distances himself from Joab in various ways, he never succeeds in expelling this serpent from his garden.

How does David's treatment of Joab color the way that we see David's own motives and the considerations that drive his actions? What lessons might we learn from this?