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Joab Kills Absalom
Second Samuel 17:24 to 18:18

Joab kills Absalom DIG: How did David benefit from the delay of Absalom's attack? With all the betrayal and spying going on, what makes David think he can trust these three generals in particular – Joab, Abishai and Ittai? Why do they want David to stay behind and let others do the fighting? In wanting to spare young Absalom, what does this again say about David? What is significant about the location of the ensuing battle in terms of tactics? Results? Absalom's fate? What irony do you see in Absalom getting hung up in the oak tree by his hair? How does the man who spotted Absalom respond to Joab's rebuke? What does Joab's treatment of Absalom reveal about him? What impact does Absalom's death have on the rest of his men? What does Absalom's building a monument to himself say about him?

REFLECT: Why do you believe our King is worth ten thousand of us? What other measures of His worth might you use? Why? As pawns sacrifice for their king in chess, and as David's men did for him, what will you do to tangibly demonstrate your belief in the unsurpassed worth of Yeshua the King? What brought this hidden truth to light for you? When have you had done to you what you've dished out to others? How could you reverse that cycle, so that "what goes around" is good and not evil?

977-976 BC

The scene shifts east of the Jordan to the showdown between **David's** loyalists and **Absalom's** rebels. The narrative now moves from extended preparation to the actual confrontation. In contrast the previous scene of preparation and negotiation, the account of the battle is terse and makes no theological references. Finally the battle must be fought. Now power, bravery and strategy are all that matter.[436]

David and Absalom in the Transjordan: **David went to Mahanaim** where **Ish-Bosheth** was crowned king (**to see link click Cg – War Between the Houses of**

David and Sha'ul), and this became **David's** base. **Hushai's** advice gave **David** time to mobilize **his army**. **And Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Isra'el.** Now **Absalom had appointed Amasa, David's** nephew **and Joab's** cousin, **over the army in place of Joab. Amasa was the son of Jether, an Ishmaelite (First Chronicles 2:17) who had married Abigail, the daughter of Nahash and sister of Zeruiah the mother of Joab.** The reason for the family history is to enable the reader to appreciate the animosity between **Amasa** and **Joab** as they commanded opposing forces.[437] **The Israelites and Absalom camped in the land of Gilead (Second Samuel 17:24-26).**

In one long Hebrew sentence, these verses reveals three "angels" who saw that **the king** and **his troops** were adequately cared for. **God** had **prepared a table before David** as **his enemies** were approaching **(Psalm 23:5)**. **When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Makir son of Ammiel from Lo Debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim brought bedding and bowls and articles of pottery. They also brought wheat and barley, flour and roasted grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from cows' milk for David and his people to eat. For they** said: **The people have become exhausted and hungry and thirsty in the wilderness (Second Samuel 17:27-29).** But **they** did so at enormous risk. The battle had not yet been fought. The issue had not been decided. Indeed, **Absalom** was likely to marshal overwhelming numbers against **David**. So against all odds, these men chose the one **YHVH** had chosen. Each one of **them** had plenty to lose. Nevertheless, **they** remained committed.

It should take no imagination to see that, as believers today, we are in the same situation. Our relation to **Yeshua Messiah**, the descendant of **David**, and **the Father's** appointed **King**, is the same. No matter how heavy the assault upon **His** authority and rule, no matter how much **He** is demeaned or despised, we are under orders to be committed to **Him**: **Whoever acknowledges Me before others, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before others, I will disown before My Father in heaven (Mattityahu 10:32-33). Second Samuel 17** shows **God's Kingdom** under attack – but also under protection. Our ultimate security does not rest on any immunity from personal disasters or any guarantee that our own nation will never fall but only in the fact that the **God** of heaven has set up a **Kingdom** and it shall stand forever.[438]

David mustered his troops: Knowing that the battle would begin shortly, **David mustered the men who were with him and appointed over them**

commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. The force that had accompanied David on his departure from Jerusalem had been augmented by the accession of many loyal followers and could now be numbered in the thousands. Once again it was **Hushai's** advice that allowed **David** the time to do this. **And David sent out his troops, a third under the command of Joab, a third under Joab's brother Abishai son of Zeruiah, and a third under** a Philistine, **Ittai the Gittite,** who was the most important of **David's** mercenary **troops** (see **Dp – David Flees From Absalom**). **The king told his army, I myself** (in the emphatic position) **will surely march out with you,** to accompany **you** for moral support **(Second Samuel 18:1-2).**

On May 6, 1864, at the Battle of the Wilderness, Union troops had broken through the Confederate lines, but their success was momentarily stalled by point-blank cannon fire. General Lee himself was there with his cannoneers as they poured double-shotted grape and canister at the Union ranks. Soon, however, Lee knew those cannoneers would be overrun unless reinforcements arrived. Then he saw them – a lead brigade of Texas troops! Lee was ecstatic. As they prepared to counter-attack Lee spurred his horse Traveler forward among them; he was preparing to lead the counter-charge himself. The troops stopped, refused to go forward, and began chanting, "Lee to the rear!" "Lee to the rear!" They cherished a warm affection for their general and recognized that his life was too valuable to their cause to be risked in the thick of battle. And so it was at **Mahanaim**.[439] **David's troops** said: **You must not go out; if we are forced to flee, they won't care about us. They** knew that should Absalom's forces gain the advantage they would zero in on **the king**. **Even if half of us die, they won't care; but you are worth ten thousand of us. It would be better now for you to give us support from the city of Mahanaim** with the rest of **the troops** left behind as reinforcements**. The king answered, "I will do whatever seems best to you" (Second Samuel 18:3-4a)**

Acquiescing to **their** wishes, **the king stood beside the gate** (where **Absalom** had once stood plotting against **his father**) **while all his men marched out in units of hundreds and of thousands. The king commanded Joab, Abishai and Ittai, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake."** Obviously, **David** wanted the coup defeated in order to retain **his** throne. Now, however, in the mouth of the commander, **the father** speaks. **He** wanted the coup to be settled decisively, but without damage to **his son** who leads it. A tall order. **And all the troops heard the king giving orders concerning Absalom to each of the**

commanders (Second Samuel 18:4b-5). But what **they** thought might have been a different matter.

In one sense, **Absalom** has been the central figure for a long time – ever since **13:23** (see **Dj – Absalom Kills Amnon**). **His** presence hangs heavily over **Chapters 13-14**, all the way to **15:12**. In **15:13** to **16:14** the focus is on **David**, but from **16:15** forward, **Absalom** is on center stage again. But in the present scene, although **Absalom** is central **he** is not in control. **He** never speaks, **he** is only acted upon. But, **Joab** is in control, if any human character can ever be said to be in control. **Joab** is dominant. **He** is the one who does "the deed" and calls all the shots. By contrast, **David** is passive. **He** is still **the king**, but **h**e's not in control.[440]

The battle between David's men and Absalom's men: David's army marched out of the city of Mahanaim to fight Isra'el, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim, along the eastern plain of the Jordan. But what *is* known is that **David** specifically picked the terrain of the battle. **There Isra'el's troops were routed by David's men, and the casualties that day were great – twenty thousand men.** This highlights not only the total devastation of **Absalom's** troops, but also the key role played by **Ha'Shem** in **their** overthrow. **The battle spread out over the whole countryside, and the forest swallowed up more men that day than the sword (Second Samuel 18:6-8).** Natural phenomena are often more deadly than human enemies. **The forest of Ephraim**, characterized by uneven and dangerous terrain, was a battleground where the numerically superior force of **Absalom's** drafted **army** would be at a disadvantage against **David's** more skilled private **army**, with its considerable experience of guerrilla warfare.[441] Removing all sense of direction, **Absalom's soldiers** wandered aimlessly, got lost, and eventually were killed one by one.

Now, we are prepared for the resolution of the conflict between **the father** and **son**. We cannot determine, however, if the final result was a victory or a defeat for **David**. The battle is no doubt a victory; the coup is defeated and **David** returned in power. Yet, **David** returned in grief, and the grief nearly overrode the victorious power. Victory in grief, power in defeat are left in unresolved tension. There are few narrative episodes concerning **David** that are more carefully written than this, or more poignantly expressed. **The commanders** needed to win, but **they** must **deal gently** with **Absalom**. The last sound **they** heard in **their** ears was the haunting words of **David**: **deal gently**.[442]

Joab Kills Absalom: By divine providence, **Absalom happened to meet David's** royal bodyguard **as he was riding his mule. He** was leading **his** men in battle because of **Hushai's** advice. As **he** turned to escape into the thicker part of the forest, **Absalom** rode full speed upon **his mule** and looking back, **his hair got caught in the thick branches of a large oak tree. He was left hanging in midair, while the mule he was riding kept on going. The traitor** hung there helplessly. The moment cannot last forever. **He** must either live or die. **David's soldiers** did not harm **him**, but neither did **they** rescue **him**. **When one of the men saw what had happened, he told Joab, "I just saw Absalom hanging from an oak tree." Joab said to the man who had told him this, "What! You saw him? Why didn't you strike him to the ground right there? Then I would have had to give you ten shekels of silver and a warrior's belt,** the symbol of a military promotion**" (Second Samuel 18:9-11).**

But the unnamed **soldier** was not intimidated. Not even for money would **he** violate **the king's** command. **He replied, "Even if a thousand shekels were weighed out into my hands, I would not lay a hand on the king's son.** The man had heard **David's** words about **Absalom**. Everyone heard. Even **Joab** heard, even though **he** now pretended otherwise. **In our hearing the king commanded**

you and Abishai and Ittai, 'Protect the young man Absalom for my sake.' And if I had put my life in jeopardy – and nothing is hidden from the king – then you yourself would have set yourself against me for disobeying **the king's** order**."** This **soldier** knew **Joab** very well. **Joab** did not bother to refute the man's analysis, saying: **I'm not going to wait like this for you.** The midst of battle was not time to discuss moral implications or political niceties. **Joab** lived in a world of simple moral choices and decisions. Instead, **Joab** did what **he** always did. **He** acted.[443] **So he took three javelins in his hand and plunged them into Absalom 's heart while Absalom was still alive, hanging** from **the oak tree. The rabbis teach that the reason Absalom received three javelins in the heart was that he captured three hearts; first, the hearts of the two hundred members of the royal court; secondly, the heart of David; and thirdly, the heart of the people of Isar'el.** The wounds were surely mortal, **then ten of Joab's armor-bearers surrounded Absalom, struck him and killed him (Second Samuel 18:12-15). Absalom** is spoken of in a completely impersonal way; no wounds are mentioned, no pleas for mercy, just the physical fact of **his** being caught in **the tree**.

The part played by **Joab** here demands an explanation in view of the fact that **he** was so supportive of **Absalom's** only a few years before. What happened to change **his** mind? **Joab** had tried to favorably position **himself** in the likelihood that **Absalom** would assume the throne after **his father** passed away. But **he** never dreamed that **the prince** would declare war on **David** or attempt a coup and assassinate **his father**. Once that became a reality, **Joab** had no choice. **He** threw his considerable influence behind **David** as the rightful **king**.

The Burial of Absalom: After **Absalom's** death, **Joab** is in complete control. **He sounded the shofar. The troops stopped pursuing Isra'el, for Joab halted them.** There was no more need for any bloodshed**.** All that remained was to bury the body of **the rebel**. This was the burial of an accursed man. Like **Achan (Joshua 7:26), they took Absalom, threw him into a large pit in the forest and piled up a heap of rocks over him.** It became an unmarked grave. A monument of shame. **Meanwhile, all the Israelites fled to their homes. During his lifetime Absalom had taken a pillar and erected it in the King's Valley as a monument to himself, for he thought, "I have no son to carry on the memory of my name." He** had three sons, but they all died young **(Second Samuel 14:25-27). He named the pillar after himself** (surprise, surprise)**, and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day (Second Samuel 18:16-18).**

This monument is not to be confused with the fifty-two-foot-tall, bottle-shaped, “Tomb/Pillar of Absalom,” a monolith cut out of a cliff in the Kidron Valley east of Jerusalem that probably received its name because of its resemblance to a pillar. Its burial chamber is reminiscent of the Hellenistic and roman sepulchers and is to be dated to the first part of the first century AD.[444]

We must see **Absalom’s** end as a microcosm. **His** death as a man under a curse is typical of what will be the lot of all who, at any time, set themselves against **God**, **His Kingdom**, **His chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6** and **First Peter 2:9)**, or **His chosen King**. While this is a somber truth, **the LORD’s** true subjects have no hope unless it is true! **How happy is the man whom You correct, YHVH, whom You teach from Your Torah, giving him respite from days of trouble, till a pit is dug for the wicked (Psalm 94:12-13 CJB).**[445]