

# Ish-Bosheth, King of Isra'el, Murdered

## Second Samuel 4: 1-12

**DIG:** Why would Abner's death cause Ish-Bosheth to lose courage? What is significant about Baanah and Rechab being Benjamites (First Samuel 9:1-2)? What motivation to kill Ish-Bosheth does this reveal? What is the meaning of Mephibosheth in relation to David's kingship? Why do Rechab and Baanah cut off Ish-Bosheth's head after killing him? What serious miscalculation did they make in doing so? How was Rechab and Baanah like, and unlike, the Amalekite (4:5-8 and 1:1-16)? How does David's treatment of the remains of Rechab, Baanah and Ish-Bosheth say about David?

**REFLECT:** "Those who live by the sword die by the sword" - how has the sword of revenge backfired on you? Where has mercy prevailed instead of such "justice" and "revenge?" David was tempted to profit from someone else's demise, but he refused. When you are so tempted, how do you overcome such thoughts?

### 1003 BC

As we have observed in the opening stories of **Second Samuel**, in order for **David** to secure power in the north, people had to die. First, there was **Sha'ul** and **Y'honatan**, then there was **Abner**. Once **Abner** was dead, the end of resistance to **David's** rule came quickly. **Ish-Bosheth** was next. His death would be a turning point for the northern kingdom, and **Isra'el** as a whole. There was nothing to stop ruthless men from taking advantage of the power vacuum, and asserting their own will upon the nation for selfish purposes and **Rechab** and **Baanah** were certainly ruthless. They were so unscrupulous that they didn't mind possibly starting a war with the southern Kingdom for personal gain. If **David** were to be implicated in any way in **Ish-Bosheth's** death, the north would have rebelled, and he would have lost all his credibility to govern in the southern kingdom of Judah as well.<sup>241</sup>

An obvious fact of **Second Samuel** is that violence produces more violence, each killing points toward a counter killing. With **Sha'ul** and **Y'honatan**, it was the Amalekite messenger who had to die (**Second Samuel** 1:15-16). With **Abner**, **Asahel** died. In this chapter with **Ish-Bosheth**, it was the ruthless **Rechab** and **Baanah** who would pay with their lives. Their deaths were necessary for the narrator to establish the innocence of **David**. He caused none of these deaths. He didn't appreciate them or celebrate them. No blood was on his hands.

**The Murderers:** These verses move quickly into the drama. When Ish-Bosheth, the youngest son of Sha'ul, heard that Abner had died in Hebron, he lost courage because he was a mere puppet in the hands of his general, and now that general was dead (see Ci - [Joab Murders Abner](#)). And all Isra'el became alarmed. The tribes in the north knew his kingdom had come to an end and they no doubt expected a swift invasion by David and his army. The common people knew nothing of David's intentions or of his recent meeting with Abner. It was a day of distress for Ish-Bosheth and his people (Second Samuel 4:1).

Now Ish-Bosheth had two men who were leaders of raiding bands under Abner's authority. One was named Ba'anah and the other Rechab; they were sons of Rimmon the Beerothite from the tribe of Benjamin - Beeroth is considered part of Benjamin, because the people of Beeroth fled to Gittaim and have resided there as foreigners to this day (Second Samuel 4:2-3). The account of Baanah and Rechab reminds us of the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Sha'ul (see Bx - [David Hears of Sha'ul's Death](#)). These two men were minor officers in Abner's army who thought they could earn rewards and promotion from David if they killed Ish-Bosheth and like the Amalekite, they were wrong. Dead wrong.<sup>242</sup>

**Mephibosheth:** This parenthetical note has the purpose to explain that the only heir to Sha'ul's throne was a lame boy of thirteen, and the conspirators could feel confident that their assassination of Ish-Bosheth would lead to David's succession to the throne. Y'honatan son of Sha'ul had a son named Mephibosheth who was lame in both feet. He was five years old when the news about Sha'ul's and Y'honatan's death came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, but as she hurried to leave, he fell, broke both feet that were never set, and as a result, became disabled (Second Samuel 4:4). His actual name was Meriba'al (First Chronicles 8:34) it was changed to Mephibosheth, meaning *shame* (Second Samuel 9:3-13).

**The Murder of Ish-Bosheth:** Ish-Bosheth appeared to have no suspicion that he might have traitors among his troops. Now Rechab and Ba'anah set out for the house of Ish-Bosheth at Mahanaim, and they arrived there in the heat of the day while he was taking his noonday rest. At this hour his guard would likewise be asleep, or at least insufficiently alert. They went into the inner part of the house as if to get some wheat. But while Ish-Bosheth was lying on the bed in his bedroom, they stabbed him in the stomach. And after killing him they cut off his head and took it with them as a prize to show David who they obviously thought would be pleased. They slipped away and traveled all night by way of the Arabah, the dry valley of the Jordan and Dead Sea to avoid meeting other travelers. They brought the head of Ish-Bosheth to David at Hebron and said to

the king, "Here is the head of Ish-Bosheth son of Sha'ul, your enemy, who tried to kill you. This day the LORD has avenged my lord the king against Sha'ul and his offspring" (Second Samuel 4:5-8). Their motivation, like that of the Amalekite, was one of reward.

But they had completely misread the policy of David, who immediately disowned them. David answered Rechab and his brother Ba'anah, "As surely as ADONAI lives, who has delivered me out of every trouble, when someone told me, 'Sha'ul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and put him to death in Ziklag. That was the reward I gave them for his news (see Ca - [David Hears of Sha'ul's Death](#)). Now, David declared, "If the Amalekite only claimed to kill Sha'ul, how much more punishment should you wicked men receive when you have killed an innocent man in his own house and on his own bed? Ish-Bosheth, though he was Sha'ul's son, was not personally involved in his father's guilt, and had done nothing to deserve death." Then the king questioned, "Should I now not demand his blood from your hand and rid the earth of you?" Their guilt was clear and their cold-blooded murder deserved the same sentence. So David gave an order to his men, and they killed them.

The contrast between the treatment of the remains of the assassins and of Ish-Bosheth could hardly be more striking. They cut off their hands because they were used to assassinate Ish-Bosheth, and feet because they ran seeking a reward, and hung their bodies by the pool in Hebron as a public warning. But they took the head of Ish-Bosheth and buried it in Abner's tomb at Hebron who had been his father's cousin (Second Samuel 4:9-12). The murder of Ish-Bosheth removed any opposition to David becoming king over all Isra'el. After so many years running from Sha'ul, the promise that YHVH made to him was about to be fulfilled.<sup>243</sup>

The murder of Ish-Bosheth is another example of the interference of opportunists who prevented David from carrying out the desires of his heart. Nevertheless, the LORD blessed him and extended his kingdom to include all Isra'el, uniting the northern kingdom of Isra'el and the southern kingdom of Judah. Evidently David was cleared of any suspicion in connection with the death of Ish-Bosheth and, in the absence of any suitable survivor from the house of Sha'ul, he was the obvious choice to be the king.<sup>244</sup>