

Lecture #13 – Exposition of II Samuel 17-21

Chapter 17 – Ahithophel Defeated – 1025 B.C.

Reese believes that David is 60 and Absalom is 28.¹

vs. 1-14 – Ahithophel’s Counsel Defeated

Ahithophel enters with a plan to defeat David by quickly striking him with a small force of 12,000 men. This tactic would not allow David time to regroup his supporters or seek refuge in a defensible position. This plan would have likely worked in defeating David and establishing Absalom as the king. It is one of the great “what-ifs” of history.

Note in verses 4 that “all the elders of Israel” support the plan. This shows how widespread Absalom’s rebellion is.

Hushai had been left behind in Jerusalem for just such a situation (II Samuel 15:32). Davis writes of his counterproposal:

“The two major points of Hushai’s counterproposal were (1) there was need of a larger army than Absalom had at his command at this time. In other words, an encounter with David with such a small army would result in a humiliating defeat for the young king. (2) Playing on the arrogance and pride of the king, Hushai suggested that the king himself lead the army into battle. This appeal to his vanity worked, and the result was that David had the additional time needed to organize his own forces in defense of his throne (17:5-23).”²

Note in vs. 14 that it was God and Hushai that defeated the counsel of Ahithophel.

vs. 15-22 – David Warned

Hushai sends word to the high priests Zadok and Abiathar so they can warn David. Their sons Jonathan and Ahimaaz are sent with the message and narrowly escape capture at Bahurim (“low ground”)³. They hid in a camouflaged well to escape Absalom’s men.

Once David receives their message, he springs into action and crossed over Jordan to put more distance between Absalom and himself.

¹ The Reese Chronological Study Bible, p. 482

² Israel: From Conquest to Exile by John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb. p. 316.

³ Smith’s Bible Dictionary

vs. 23 – Ahithophel’s Suicide

Ahithophel could anticipate the outcome of following Hushai’s advice. He knew David would be allowed time to escape and his forces would be able to defeat the prideful Absalom. Seeing the sureness of David’s victory, he commits suicide rather than be captured by David. Or maybe he was more scared of Joab...

It may be observed that there are some parallels between Ahithophel and Judas Iscariot. Both betrayed their masters, and both hung themselves. Some believe that Psalms 41:9 and 55:12-13, which speak prophetically of Judas, speak of Ahithophel in their primary application.

vs. 24-29 – Preparation for Battle

David makes camp near Mahanaim on the east side of Jordan. Absalom gathers his forces and crosses over in pursuit.

Amasa (“a burden”)⁴ is made the general over the armies of Absalom. His genealogy is given but is a little hard to follow. The language here in vs. 25 suggests he is an illegitimate child of Ithra (“excellence”)⁵, who is called Jether (“his excellence”)⁶ in I Chronicles 2:17. He is described as an “Israelite” here and an “Ishmaelite” in I Chronicles. Matthew Poole comments on Ithra/Jether being called an Ishmaelite:

“...because he was such, either by his birth from such parents, or by his long habitation among them, or for some other reason now unknown. Compare 2 Samuel 15:18. And Amasa is here called an Israelite, either because he was a proselyte; or in opposition to Joab, who was of the tribe of Judah, as Amasa was of one of the ten tribes; or rather, to intimate, that although he or his parents were called Ishmaelites for some reason, yet as to their extraction they were indeed Israelites; which if Amasa had not been, it is not probable that he could have had so powerful an influence upon the tribe of Judah as he had, 2 Samuel 19:14.”⁷

But his father is only the first difficulty. His mother presents another. She is described as “Abigail the daughter of Nahash, sister to Zeruiah Joab's mother.” She and Zeruiah (“balsam”)⁸ and are described as being the sisters of David in I Chronicles 2:16. We also reminded in that verse that Zeruiah is the mother of Joab. Since her sister is the mother of Amasa, we see that both Joab and Amasa have the same connection to David, being his nephews.

The issue is the identity of Abigail’s father. He is identified here as Nahash. Some, such as John Gill⁹, believe that Nahash is another name for Jesse. Some believe that Nahash was David’s mother’s name,

⁴ Smith’s Bible Dictionary

⁵ Smith’s Bible Dictionary

⁶ Smith’s Bible Dictionary

⁷ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_samuel/17-25.htm - accessed 10-3-22

⁸ Smith’s Bible Dictionary

⁹ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_samuel/17-25.htm - accessed 10-3-22

but the Pulpit Commentary observes that the name is constantly a man's name in its usage.¹⁰ Others, like Edersheim¹¹, speculate that David's mother was married twice, with Zeruah and Abigail being daughters of a first marriage to someone named Nahash and David being son of the second marriage to Jesse. Thus, the sisters would be David's half-sisters. This might have some support in that Joab, Amasa, etc. are never referred to as sons of Jesse yet their kinship to David is still highlighted.

Three allies come to David's aid with much needed supplies. Shobi ("glorious")¹² appears to be the son of the Ammonite king Nahash, brother of the deposed king Hanun. Machir ("sold")¹³ is the man who had cared for Mephibosheth (II Samuel 9:5), perhaps here repaying David's kindness toward Mephibosheth. Barzillai ("*iron*, that is *strong*")¹⁴ will have his kindness to David repaid by Solomon.

♪ Psalms 4, 14, 22, 25, 28, 53, 69, 70.

Chapter 18 – David vs. Absalom

vs. 1-5 – David's Charge

David's battle plan revolves around dividing his forces into thirds under independent commands of Joab, Abishai, and Ittai. He is prevented from going to battle himself by his generals. David is getting older now and not in his prime. He likely would have been the sole target of attack for Absalom, so removing him from the field may have given them a tactical edge.

David's one request, heard by all the people, was that Absalom should be shown mercy.

vs. 6-8 – Battle of Wood of Ephraim

The name of the battlefield likely comes from an earlier battle there in Judges 12:4. The terrain was forested, hilly, and with many pits and crevices. From a tactical standpoint, the divided command of David's army was better able to deal with the confusion of the battle than the unified command of Absalom's forces under Amasa. Vs. 8 appears to refer to the confused retreat through the woods as Absalom was driven from the field.

¹⁰ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_samuel/17-25.htm - accessed 10-3-22

¹¹ Bible History: Old Testament by Alfred Edersheim. Book 5, p. 26

¹² Smith's Bible Dictionary

¹³ Smith's Bible Dictionary

¹⁴ Smith's Bible Dictionary

vs. 9-18 – Death of Absalom

As part of the confused battle in the wood, Absalom is pulled from the mule he rode as his head is tangled in the branches of a tree. The text does not say it was his hair, but his head (*rosh*, Strong's H7218, is never translated as "hair") that was caught. It is merely an assumption that his hair was caught because it was mentioned before. Had we no knowledge of his famous hair it would never be assumed here. *Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers* states: "There is nothing said to support the common idea (which seems to have originated with Josephus), that he hung by his long hair, though this may doubtless have helped to entangle his head."¹⁵

One of David's men reports to Joab the situation of Absalom. Joab remarks that he would have given him ten shekels (roughly four ounces) of silver if he would have killed him. The man responds that he would not do it for a thousand shekels (roughly twenty-five pounds). Joab acts quickly before anyone can intervene and strikes him three times with "darts", which may have been nothing more than pointed sticks.¹⁶ Absalom still lived, though likely mortally wounded. Joab's men finish him off.

Joab signals for his forces to cease their pursuit of the fleeing enemy. The victory was won with the death of Absalom. His manner of death was shameful (Deuteronomy 21:23) and his burial seems to be also, reminiscent of the punishment of a rebellious son (Deuteronomy 21:21).

Gaebelein comments on the pillar that Absalom had erected:

"He had looked for a more honorable death, for he had reared a pillar in his lifetime, which he called after his own name, "for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance." Those who claim that the books of Samuel are a patchwork of a number of writers who made use of different sources, refer us to 2 Samuel 14:27 and point out the discrepancy. But why should there be? Absalom may have put up this monument before he had any sons, or he may have lost his two sons."¹⁷

vs. 19-33 – David Mourns Absalom

The story of how Ahimaaz and Cushie bear the message to David would almost be comical if in another setting. Ahimaaz left second, and without instructions on delivering the news about Absalom, but arrives first. David hears of the victory from him. Cushie then arrives, with the additional message that Absalom had been killed.

David's grief overshadows the victory of the battle.

¹⁵ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/2_samuel/18.htm - accessed 10-3-22

¹⁶ Bible History: Old Testament by Alfred Edersheim. Book 5, p. 28.

¹⁷ Annotated Bible by A.C. Gaebelein. E-Sword module.

Chapter 19 – David’s Return

vs. 1-8 – David’s Mourning Ends

David’s mourning affects the morale of his men. Instead of celebrating the victory, they mourn it as a loss. It takes a stern word from Joab for him to end his mourning.

Merrill writes:

“This was the final straw as far as Joab was concerned. David had punished the young man who claimed to be the assassin of his enemy Saul (2 Sam. 1:15); he had held a state funeral and had lamented publicly for Abner, whom Joab himself had slain (2 Sam. 3:31-39); he had executed the murderers of Ish-Bosheth, the chief obstacle to his reigning over Israel (2 Sam. 4:12); and now, once again, he wept for all the world to see when Joab had done him the favor of ridding him of his rebellious son and competitor (2 Sam. 18:33). The cynic might with some justification discern a degree of political motivation in some of David’s propensity to grieve over his enemies, but that can hardly be the case here. David sincerely wished that he had died in place of his son, for was it not David’s own adulterous and murderous acts which had brought the sword upon Absalom?”

“Joab did not see the situation this way, however. He chided David for his insensitivity toward him and the others who had done what they thought to be in David’s best interests. ‘You love those who hate you and hate those who love you,’¹⁸ he said (2 Sam. 19:6). Furthermore, Joab went on, if David did not assuage the wounded feelings of his people, he would end up the loser anyway.”¹⁹

Thus ends the rebellion of Absalom.

vs. 9-10 – The State of the Kingdom

There is uncertainty above David returning. The people remember the good that he has done for them. Now that Absalom was dead, do they bring David back or seek another?

♪ Psalm 122²⁰

vs. 11-40 – David’s Return Journey

David makes overtures to his own tribe of Judah, who also seems hesitant to bring David back. Zadok and Abiathar are sent as his emissaries to sway the people and to court Amasa to join him as general, replacing Joab. Judah is moved and David is greeted warmly on his return.

¹⁸ Not KJV. Boo!

¹⁹ *Kingdom of Priests* by Eugene Merrill, p. 270-271.

²⁰ I’m not sure can I agree with Reese on the placement of this Psalm here.

Notice that David's actions are not that of a strong monarch here. He is instead cautious careful of his actions as he comes back across Jordan.

Shimei, the kinsmen of Saul that had cursed David on his flight from Jerusalem, seeks forgiveness. Abishai wants to kill him, but David spares him. For now...²¹

Mephibosheth meets David also. Carroll remarks:

“The darkest blot on David, outside of the sin against Uriah, is in this paragraph, the meeting with Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth comes to meet him and David sternly asks why he had not gone out with him when he left Jerusalem. He gently explains that he was crippled and could not walk, and that he ordered his beast to be saddled and his servants went off and left him; that he is now glad to welcome David back, and that it was a falsehood that he ever intended to profit by David's misfortunes. David then restores to him part of his property and lets that rascal Ziba keep half of it. In all this transaction Mephibosheth comes out in a much more favorable light than David: ‘Let him take it all forasmuch as my lord, the king, has come in peace unto his own house.’ This does not show off David very well.”

All that David did for Mephibosheth was revoke the order of II Samuel 16:4 and restore the agreement of II Samuel 9:10. Ziba's plot to usurp his master fails, but he faces no punishment for his actions. Merrill speculates this may all be an attempt to appease the tribe of Benjamin.²²

David rewards Barzillai for his support, apparently giving his son Chimham an estate (see Jeremiah 41:17).

♪ Psalm 23

vs. 41-43 – Israel vs. Judah

The Northern tribes appear to feel slighted in Judah acting alone in reaccepting David and transporting him to Jerusalem. The growing political division what will rupture in about 50 years' time is apparent here. The kingdom is far from united.

♪ Psalm 40

²¹ Spoiler: I Kings 2:8-9,36-46

²² *Kingdom of Priests* by Eugene Merrill, p. 271-272.

Chapter 20 – Sheba’s Rebellion – 1023 B.C.

vs. 1-3 – Sheba Rebels

Before David can even return to Jerusalem, a wicked man named Sheba (“an oath, seven”)²³ leads a revolt of the northern tribes against David. Because Sheba is a Benjaminite, we assume some jealousy at the loss of the throne from Benjamin to Judah. Judah remains faithful to David.

Included as a side note in vs. 3, David cares for the concubines that Absalom defiled. These are taken care of for the rest of their lives but are no longer concubines to David.

vs. 4-13 – Joab Kills Amasa

David tasks Amasa, not Joab, with quelling the revolt. Joab appears to have lost favor because of his killing Absalom. When Amasa delays²⁴, David again bypasses Joab by sending Abishai. Joab does not sit idly by but goes with David’s bodyguard and his mighty men to join the other forces.

Joab has not forgotten the slight against him when David replaced him with Amasa. That is deepened in that Amasa had been with the enemy before David’s return. Joab makes a show of stumbling and losing his sword. When Amasa draws near Joab makes as if to greet him, but instead kills him. Joab then asserts himself as commander.

vs. 14-22 – Death of Sheba

Joab besieges the stronghold of Abel (“breath”)²⁵ on the far north of Israel in the territory belonging to Naphtali. There Sheba has gathered his supporters²⁶ to make a stand against David.

Joab works to overcome the city’s defenses. There appears to be a trench or moat that he fills to cross. He then begins battering the walls.

There was a “wise woman” in the city, perhaps the only inhabitant that had any sense in the situation. She appeals to the city’s reputation as a place where wisdom could be found and asks if Joab truly desired to destroy the city of his fellow Israelites. Joab replies that all he wants is Sheba. The woman promises his head and delivers it. Joab leads his forces back to Jerusalem.

♪ Psalm 27

²³ Easton’s Bible Dictionary

²⁴ Why did he do this? Was he still working against David? Was he trying to aid Sheba? I have suspicions.

²⁵ Smith’s Bible Dictionary

²⁶ The Berites are the men of Beeroth, Sheba’s kinsmen.

vs. 23-26 – David’s Administration

We last saw David’s administrators in II Samuel 8, about 20 years²⁷ before this. Joab is still over the military and Benaiah over the bodyguard. Jehoshaphat is still the recorder. Zadok is still high priest but is now paired with Abiathar instead of Ahimlech. A new office appears here over the tribute received by David, filled by Adoram. Ira is the “chief ruler”²⁸, replacing David’s sons in that role.

Chapter 21 – David and the Gibeonites – 1023-1020 B.C.

vs. 1-11 – Vengeance for Gibeah

After a three-year famine, it is revealed that the cause is a lack of justice against Saul’s house for crimes against the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites were descendants of the Amorite people that tricked Joshua into a peace treaty (Joshua 9). They became slaves to Israel, were support staff for the Tabernacle (Joshua 9:27) and settled with Benjamin (Joshua 21:17). When Saul killed the Gibeonites in violation of the treaty of Joshua 9 is not known. The best assumption is they were killed during the attack on Nob in I Samuel 22:17-19 roughly 40 years before.

To make restitution for the crimes of Saul, the Gibeonites request that seven men of Saul’s family be slain. They would be killed and then “hung” in shame as a sign of the reproach of Saul’s house. This appears to go against the principle of Deuteronomy 24:16 that children should not be put to death for the sins of their fathers. Some, like Gaebelein,²⁹ see the request as sinful and David as wrong for fulfilling it. Davis believes “it is more likely that Saul’s sons had been directly implicated in the attack on the Gibeonites and therefore received just punishment for their evil deeds.”³⁰

David spares Mephibosheth from this fate, but delivers two sons of Rizpah, Saul’s concubine, and five of his Merab, Saul’s daughter, which were been raised by Michal.³¹ These were executed by the Gibeonites in the spring and left hanging³² from spring to fall.³³ Rizpah showed her motherly devotion by watching over the remains.

²⁷ Reese’s Chronological Bible

²⁸ The word used here is *kohen* (Strong’s H2026), a word generally used for priests though it can also mean “chief” or “principal”. This appears to be a role like a prime minister.

²⁹ Annotated Bible by A.C. Gaebelein. E-Sword module.

³⁰ Israel: From Conquest to Exile by John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb. p. 319.

³¹ II Samuel 21:8 is supposed by the critics to have an error here. They claim it should be Merab’s name and not her sister Michal’s in the text. However, the conclusion of the verse clears up any confusion. These were the sons of Adriel by his wife Merab (I Samuel 18:19) that were raised by Michal, who bore no children. There is no error here, just very concise wording. They were simply better known for being the wards of Michal than the offspring of Merab.

³² In violation of Deuteronomy 21:23

³³ This is one interpretation of “until water dropped upon them”, meaning the times of latter rain in the fall season. It could also mean until the famine ceased.

vs. 12-14 – David buries Saul and Jonathan

David appears to have been moved by Rizpah's devotion. He buries the remains of the seven hanged by Saul, along with the remains with remains of Saul and Jonathan, in the family tomb of Kish.

vs. 15-22 – Battles Against the Philistines

↻ I Chronicles 20:18-22

The Philistines make another offensive against Israel. David is almost slain in battle by a giant named Ishbibenob (“he that dwells at Nob”)³⁴, who had a spear weighing 7½ pounds.³⁵ Abishai comes to his aid and slays the giant.

David is now 64 years old³⁶ and the trials of his life have taken their toll. However, his men follow in the footsteps of their leader and become giant killers themselves. Joining Abishai in those ranks are Sibbechai (“a weaver”)³⁷ who slew the giant Saph (“tall”)³⁸, Elhanan (“the grace of God”)³⁹ who slew the brother⁴⁰ of Goliath named Lahmi (“warrior”)⁴¹, and Jonathan who slew the giant with 12 fingers and 12 toes.

³⁴ Smith's Bible Dictionary. Kind of expected that one to be a lot cooler.

³⁵ Reese's Chronological Bible. p. 496.

³⁶ Reese's Chronological Bible.

³⁷ Smith's Bible Dictionary

³⁸ Smith's Bible Dictionary

³⁹ Smith's Bible Dictionary

⁴⁰ This relation is made clearer in the parallel I Chronicles 20:5. This is not an error, but an occasion where the earlier record as so succinct that it was expanded with greater detail in the later account to avoid any confusion.

⁴¹ Smith's Bible Dictionary. The name is from the parallel passage in I Chronicles 20:5