

ABSALOM – THE BACKSTORY

Absalom, King David's son who staged a coup against him, was a deeply disturbed and complicated character. While his grievances against his father were legitimate, his almost pathological response to his father's injustice revealed his true nature. His ultimate desire was to supplant his father as king, but the search for true justice was never his intention demonstrated by the innocent victims he left in his wake. Pride was his true motivator and while he bested David time and time again, in the end, he could not compete against his father who was a true leader and warrior.

Absalom's birth was the result of a political marriage between King David and Maacah, the daughter of the King of Geshur, Talmai (II Samuel 3:3). Geshur was an Aramean kingdom that lay east of the Sea of Galilee, within the allotted land of Manasseh. While David's affair with Bathsheba was certainly one of passion, at least on his part, his marriage to Maacah was less romantic. Political marriages were common in the ancient world. They were strategic methods used by kings to maintain friendly relations with allies and keep populations on friendly terms. David's marriage to Maacah was no different, but it would certainly complicate family dynamics. Despite Absalom's status as a son of a political marriage, David's love for him was never in question. On the other hand, Absalom would use his position as David's son and the grandson of the King of Geshur to his advantage to protect himself.

Absalom is best known for his betrayal of his father King David, but that betrayal did not occur in a vacuum. It was long brewing and it was sparked by the rape of his sister, Tamar.

Amnon was David's first-born son and he developed lust-filled affection for Tamar, his half-sister. With the help of his cousin Jonadab, he planned a ruse to lure Tamar into his bed chamber. While pretending to be sick and after convincing his father David to allow Tamar to serve him, he raped her. This was only the first evil (II Samuel 13:1-22). The second was his refusal to take responsibility for his actions. Per the law, Amnon would have been required to pay the bride price for his actions (Exodus 22:16-17), but instead, he treated his sister, a princess, as a common woman and forced her from his presence (II Samuel 13:17).

After the incident, Absalom comforted his sister and took financial responsibility for her (what Amnon should have done, but did not). He would even name his daughter after her. While he initially kept his feelings about the incident to himself, his heart was clearly calculating

revenge (II Samuel 13:22).

After the incident, King David was enraged (II Samuel 13:21), but did nothing to correct his son Amnon. No doubt, that only sparked a hatred towards King David, not only for failing to reprimand Amnon but for allowing Tamar to serve Amnon in the first place. As the King, he was ultimately responsible for bringing order within his household, but while decisive on the battlefield, King David was irresolute among his sons.

Since David, withheld his reproof, Absalom took matters into his own hands. After two years of brewing in his anger, Absalom used the same cunning approach as his brother Amnon to lure him to his death. He convinced King David to allow all his brothers to attend the festivities of sheep shearing which was usually a time of unbridled hospitality and merriment. (The biblical accounts of Abigail and Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, also took place around the time of sheep shearing)

During the festivities, Absalom gave orders to his "servants" to wait until Amnon was drunk and then kill him. While most of the Bible translations use the word "servants," it could also be translated as "young men" or just "men" per the use of the Hebrew word behind the translations, na'ar (NIV and CSB both use the words "men" or "young men" instead of "servants"). The word "servants" in our modern English connotes hired help like maids or butlers, but the context paints a different picture. The use of the word here more likely refers to men with military training. The execution of a prince of Israel like Amnon would not have been left in the hands of household servants but, would have rather been carried out by trained warriors.

After "the men" kill Amnon, Absalom's brothers flee in fear. This detail also demonstrates the nature of the execution. These men were not running from household servants, but from a gruesome scene where trained warriors just took out David's firstborn.

After the incident, Absalom flees and seeks refuge from his grandfather the king of Geshur, Talmai the son of Ammihud (II Samuel 13:34-39). Being the offspring of a political marriage had its advantages. While Geshur was likely a tributary of Israel, under King David's control, it does not seem that David demanded Talmai to hand over Absalom. Absalom was sheltered there for three years.

Joab, the commander of David's Army, convinced King David through a ruse to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem (II Samuel 14). Why did Joab

intervene? The sorrow of losing Absalom was affecting the King's demeanor, but it may have also affected his ability to govern effectively. That might have driven Joab to push the king to bring his son back to Jerusalem. We will see Joab intervene again later when the King's grief after Absalom's death puts at risk the loyalty of his men.

King David allows Joab to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem but does not want him in his presence. Absalom is not satisfied with the arrangement and after two years he summons Joab on two separate occasions. Joab ignores Absalom and in response, Absalom orders his men to burn Joab's fields. Absalom's actions were brazen, considering Joab was not a man many would cross. But he probably felt secure in his father's protection who up to this point had not pursued any kind of punishment for Absalom's actions. The burning of the fields did indeed get Joab's attention who subsequently arranged a meeting with the king. As a result, Absalom was welcomed back into the king's court.

In chapter 15, Absalom's true intentions are revealed. His desire to return to court was not born out of love for his father, but to pull the kingdom from right under his feet. The first verse in 2 Samuel 15 shows us just how self-absorbed Absalom was. Horses and chariots were not common in King David's army. The surrounding terrain was not conducive for chariot warfare because it lacked open plains. So for Absalom to acquire a chariot and horses was clearly more for pomp and circumstance (II Samuel 15:1). It could have also been part of his plan to gain favor among the people. A handsome prince (II Samuel 14:25) riding on a chariot might have helped to elevate people's perception of Absalom. (The Bible specifically mentions Absalom's good looks in II Samuel 14:25).

At the center of his political maneuvering, was building popular support by directly engaging with the people. The growth of the kingdom and David's preoccupation with other matters likely led to a degradation in the daily administration of justice. Absalom seems to take advantage of the lack of justice at the gates, the defacto town hall in ancient Israel.

Through these daily interactions, he could feel the pulse of discontent among the common people, sow distrust of the king and his administration, and build alliances with tribe elders. The presence of the king, or at least his loyal subjects, would have been expected at the gates. For Absalom to have been politically successful means that David and his men were regularly absent. At worst, David was aware but

thought his son was working in the best interest of his kingdom and his reign. Regardless, Absalom was successful. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

While Absalom was able to build political alliances right under the nose of David in Jerusalem, building a formidable army from Jerusalem would have been more difficult. He would have had to contend not only with David, but with David's loyal mighty men, particularly Joab and Benaiah. This is probably why Absalom, after building his political network for four years, decides to move operations to Hebron, the location where David began his reign.

Under the guise of fulfilling a vow, Absalom obtains permission from King David to go to Hebron (II Samuel 15:7-9). While doing so, he sends secret messages to key figures throughout the tribes of Israel, people he hand-picked during his political maneuvering in Jerusalem. They were to proclaim his kingship in Hebron at the appointed time.

In addition to the secret messages, Absalom makes two strategic decisions. The first was to invite 200 men to Hebron, which we can only assume were men of importance within David's kingdom. The men innocently accept the invitation. With this move, Absalom is further isolating David by stripping him of key players. He is also isolating these men so that at the point of rebellion, they are unable to help David, and likely forced to help Absalom for fear of their own lives.

The second decision was to call for Ahithophel from his home city Giloh. Ahithophel had been a trusted counselor to David and would have had an insider's view of how David and his men operated. For him to join Absalom means he had ultimately betrayed his friend and king, David.

When David was briefed on the level of support Absalom had throughout Israel, he fled from Jerusalem. Absalom took Jerusalem without bloodshed which is almost unbelievable considering the level of support David had from the Army (II Samuel 15:13-14). Joab, the army commander, was still loyal to David. So how exactly was Absalom able to achieve such a feat?

The clue may lie in II Samuel 16:15. "Now Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, came to Jerusalem, and Ahithophel with him."

The phrase, "all the people," is used a few times in the records about David. Based on the evidence we have on how David's military was

organized, “all the people,” may be referring to the militia. This would have been David’s reserve force. It was not centrally controlled like the regular army under Joab. The militia was trained at the tribal level and their allegiance would have been to their local commanders.

When Absalom was making allies at the gates, these local commanders and tribal leaders would have been natural targets for his political campaign. If Absalom had gained the support of the militia, a much larger force than the regular Army, it is easier to see how it was not in David’s favor to stand and fight within the walls of Jerusalem.

The level of Absalom’s depravity reached its peak when he not only slept with (or rather raped) David’s concubines, but he did it in a very public manner. On the same rooftop where David had lusted after Bathsheba, Absalom pitched a tent and violated David’s concubines. In doing so and by violating Torah law, he guaranteed a permanent rift between himself and David. (II Samuel 16:15-23)

But the one who advised Absalom to commit such a heinous act was Ahithophel. What would have caused David’s trusted advisor Ahithophel to turn so viciously against David? Biblical evidence suggests that Ahithophel might have been Bethsheba’s grandfather (See II Samuel 23:34 and II Samuel 11:3).

In the end, Absalom and Ahithophel were two men wronged by David. Ahithophel’s granddaughter, Bathsheba, was violated by David, and Absalom’s sister was violated by David’s first-born son who was never held accountable by his father.

Absalom’s defeat begins at the hand of David his father. While Absalom had obtained Ahithophel’s allegiance as counselor, David sent his friend Hushai to infiltrate Absalom’s inner circle (II Samuel 15:32-37). Absalom did initially question Hushai, yet his over-confidence in his ability to turn so many against his father probably blinded him to Hushai’s true intentions (II Samuel 16:16-19). This error, in an otherwise brilliant political maneuver, would cost Absalom the war and his life.

When Absalom asks Ahithophel for next steps, he advises Absalom to pursue King David and his men at once. Ahithophel wanted to take 12,000 men to overtake David. It was a sound strategy as David and his men would be weary, weakened, with little access to provisions (II Samuel 17:1-4). They were on the run and Absalom had the initiative, but Absalom insisted on hearing Hushai’s counsel as well.

Hushai naturally countered Ahithophel's advice. He played on the reputation of David and his mighty men's experience living and fighting on the run. He convinces Absalom that if he would send men, they would be on a fool's errand searching aimlessly for men who knew how to run and hide. And at the first moment that Absalom's men would fall to a surprise attack, it would demoralize his forces (II Samuel 17:9-10). Instead, he suggests that Absalom build up his forces and hit David with overwhelming power. Absalom played right into his hand.

While Absalom gathered his forces as advised by Hushai, King David was able to obtain provisions, refresh and organize his men (II Samuel 17: 25-18:2). They were also able to choose the place of battle, the forest of Ephraim, an ideal location when going up against a larger force. The rough terrain was not suited for shoulder-to-shoulder fighting (such as the phalanx) common in ancient warfare. The scripture itself says, "and the forest devoured more people that day than the forest." But it would have played in the favor of David's more experienced men.

In the fog of war, the handsome and prideful Absalom met a humiliating end. While riding his donkey, probably on the run from David's men, his hair got caught on the branches of a great oak tree (II Samuel 18:9). The donkey fled, leaving Absalom hanging from his locks.

Now, David had given orders that his son was to be spared. However, Joab, probably knowing full well David's inability to see things clearly when it came to his children, disregarded David's orders. It was not the first time (and it wouldn't be the last). He speared Absalom three times where he hung. (II Samuel 18:10-15)

Few men are both great politicians and great warriors. King David was one of those men, and Absalom aspired to be one as well. Absalom, through political schemes and deceit, was able to pull the kingdom from right under his father's feet. It is difficult to ascertain if his initial success was because he was the better politician or because David was blinded by his sons. Regardless, in the end, King David proved to be the more cunning leader, outwitting his son in the end, and thoroughly defeating his forces in battle.

Absalom learned a hard lesson. A politician cannot win a war without exceptional warriors to lead men into battle. But his pride blinded him from seeing his own shortcomings. Poetically, Absalom's hair, a visible representation of his vanity, was also his undoing. As he hung from that

oak tree, the uselessness of his pride was on full display. With no mercy, Joab speared the helpless Absalom. With the same callousness that Absalom used to kill Amnon and rape innocent women, he too was cut down. Justice found him in the thick woods of Ephraim.