

United Kingdom - King David

The reign of David, from the Hebron years to his Death



By Isaac Humphrey

Summary

On the death of Saul, David becomes king of Judah while the other tribes follow an heir of Saul. A civil war follows, which David wins. On becoming king of a reunited Israel, David defeats Israel's enemies and expands their borders. But, at the height of his prosperity, David suffers a moral fall; the consequences of which plague him for the rest of his life.

Hebron Years

The news of the battle came as a shock to David; the loss of his best friend Jonathan and the defeat Israel suffered moved him deeply. But out of this tragedy came his chance at the throne.

It began a new stage for Israel; for the first time recorded, Israel was divided into north and south. The south was the single tribe of Judah, and the north the rest of Israel.

Judah chose David as their king, and Israel chose Saul's son Ishbosheth. Ishbosheth was a puppet - the real power behind the throne was Saul's old general and uncle, Abner.¹

Abner was able to keep busy at his old trade because a war broke out between David and Ishbosheth. As several years rolled by, the army of Judah (led primarily by David's cousin and general Joab) gained the upper hand. Israel's Abner/Ishbosheth regime started to fall apart. Abner and Ishbosheth quarreled, Joab kept winning victories; so Abner decided that Israel was fighting a losing battle and that the time for peace had come. Abner decided to desert Ishbosheth and reconcile Israel to Judah and David's leadership.²

Abner and 20 representatives came down to Hebron to open peace talks. There they met with a great reception. Abner headed home to set up a formal reconciliation. It was a most important and delicate task, the war that had raged for years, and there was bad blood between Israel and Judah.

It was not long after Abner left the reception (headed home on his important mission) that David received the shocking news that he had been murdered! The criminal was no less a person than David's chief commander Joab. Joab committed the murder for private revenge; because of some of that bad blood that had arisen from the war. David was horrified and upset by this crime. He ordered a public funeral, made them all (including Joab) follow the bier as mourners, and he cursed the murder who perpetrated the crime. He did not, however, do anything to punish Joab. Joab was too powerful, too useful, too dangerous, maybe too much of an old friend to execute. No, Joab stayed on and continued to hold sway over David. This crime did not prevent the reunion of north

and south. David was soon installed as king of all Israel and set about conquering a new city to make his capital - Jerusalem.

David's Military Conquests

During the leadership of Samuel and Saul, Israel had moved to a better position in relation to their neighbors. Israel was no longer a prey to their stronger neighbors - they could hold their own, fight for themselves. They had turned back to God for a long time; longer than during the Judges, and God was fighting on their side.

We do not know much about Israel's foreign relations during the civil war between Ishbosheth and David but the Philistines are not on record as having taken advantage of Israel's disturbed state. When the nation was united under the strong leadership of David, Israel moved from an equal to a superior in relation to their neighbors. On all fronts, Israel's neighbors became tributaries. Even more distant enemies that crossed swords with David soon regretted their actions.³

It was during this time that David established a commercial relationship with Hiram of Tyre that would play a part in the building of Solomon's temple in years to come. During this period, David paid attention to internal as well as external matters. He decided to show his gratitude to God by taking care of the Ark of the Covenant and made plans to build a temple. The ark was taken special care of - especially when Israel realized the lethal power it contained (as in the case of Uzzah - 2 Samuel 6:6-7). As to David's plans for building a temple, God had a different man in mind. The temple would not be built until the next generation.

Two of David's early victories as king of Israel were over the Philistines in the valley of Rephaim. The Philistines were to suffer repeated defeats during the reign of David, and they never recovered their strength. Moab becomes tributary, so does Edom. The Syrians, who would one day take the place of the Philistines as Israel's perpetual enemy, were now just coming on the scene. David defeated them and made them pay tribute, but their power had not yet reached its zenith, and these early checks did not have much effect on their later strength.

The last great conquest of David's reign, Ammon, was not the result of his aggression but provoked by the behavior of the Ammonites. David had been on good terms with their old sovereign. When that king died, David sent ambassadors to offer his condolences and establish good relations with his son. But the new king's advisors had been watching with natural apprehension and trepidation at David's growing might. Their neighbors to the north and south had been defeated and made tributaries, so why should not they be next? So sure was Ammon's new administration of Israel's imperial designs: that they treated David's ambassadors as spies and sent them home shamefully treated and insulted. Of course, this rude breakoff of diplomatic negotiations brought about a war, and the Ammonites hired a group of Syrians and mercenaries from other countries.⁴ The Ammonites' allies added up to an impressive force, and the Ammonites now menaced Israel with a serious threat. During all his wars, David had sometimes led his men in person; but as time went on, he trusted more and more to his cousin and general Joab. Joab and his brother Abishai led Israel's forces, who faced a

battle in front, and behind them - two fronts. But Joab and his brother agreed to an ingenious battle plan: each front would keep track of the other, and send help to whichever one was the hardest pressed. As simple as it sounds and obviously not unique, there were several ancient battles where wings of an army would lose track of each other, and in their haste to pursue the enemy that they beat, they would leave the rest of their comrades to be defeated. ⁵

This battle, which probably took place near Ammon's capital city was a victory for Israel. Ammon was beaten, but the Syrians wanted to try again. Their attack was larger than the one before, and David himself took the field against them. It was another success for Israel, and the Syrians would not be a threat to Israel for many years to come. After this huge success, David left Joab to finish the conquest of Ammon and complete the siege of its capital city, Rabbah.

David was at the height of his physical success and prosperity, but he was approaching the greatest spiritual fall of his life. A fall that would soon sour his prosperity and success and would make his later years full of sorrow and tears.

David's Fall

David expanded Israel's borders and subdued Israel's enemies. In these years, Israel went from a divided nation, and prey to powerful neighbors, to the dominant force in the region. On all fronts, David and his army were successful. Joab proved an indispensable general, and much of the credit for victories doubtless goes to him. At last, David felt that he was invincible, that he could have anything he wanted.

He forgot the days when he was a shepherd boy - when God chose him as king. ⁶ He forgot the time when he fled from Saul - putting all his trust in God. He becomes too much like Joab - unscrupulous and cunning. When a desire came, he gratified it. He got out of the habit of telling himself no. He started to lose hold of his sense of right and wrong. So it was, when he saw a certain woman named Bathsheeba, he forgot self-control and scruples and thought only of his passions. He was a king, and no one could tell him "no." He took the woman. It mattered not that she was the wife of one of his best and most faithful fighting men. After he was unable to cover his crime, he became more unscrupulous and desperate. He had Joab arrange a little 'accident.' He had the Bathsheeba's brave and loyal husband sent by Joab to the hottest fighting, and then abandoned to the swords of the enemy. This vile plan carried out, David found himself on the wrong side of the law, God's favor, ⁷ and more in the power of Joab ⁷, who shared his guilty secret.

David's sense of justice was suppressed in his own case, but it was not completely gone. He was led to recognize his fault by the prophet Nathan and pardoned by God. But consequences would come. David's children could not have been ignorant of the affair, and the lesson they learned was a dangerous one.

Absalom's Rebellion

David's great crime would have lasting consequences. The very sins of lust and murder

would soon come into his household and bite him. When the bite came, he was left weak. Weak because of his love of his children and the consciousness of his own guilt.

8

The sins in his own house came in the same order as his own. Amnon, his eldest son, forced his half-sister Tamar. David was angry at this shocking crime, but his response was compromised by his love for his son, as well as the consciousness of his own guilty actions along similar lines. Maybe he hoped that Amnon would repent as he had; maybe he hoped that time would heal the situation, but it only worsened it. Tamar's full brother Absalom decided that justice was not being done and took matters into his own hands. He cleverly trapped and killed Amnon. Absalom had murdered Amnon publicly and so was forced to flee Israel. This was a fresh blow to David who once again grieved, but did nothing. After the lapse of time, David seemed inclined to allow Absalom to return and hoped the family situation would heal. But David did not do anything about his feelings. Absalom, it seemed, could not return without his permission, but David did not do anything, and there the matter stood. The push for Absalom's return came from an unexpected quarter: Joab. David's general concocted a subtle scheme for procuring Absalom's return. The whole chain of events seems bizarre and round-about, but it ended with Absalom's return home.⁹

Absalom was allowed to return to Jerusalem, but David still held him at arms-length and refused to see him. Joab understood the royal thoughts and no longer acted on Absalom's behalf. Only by turning to arson was Absalom able to have an interview with Joab over the latter's burned field. The king and his son were finally reunited; it looked like a reconciliation had taken place. David's heart may have been softened, but Absalom's was not. Absalom felt that he and his cause against Amnon had been just, and David had not only failed to carry out justice in the case but was unduly harsh to the one who did.¹⁰ Over the years that had elapsed, the years of banishment and unforgiveness, Absalom had been nursing his grudge. But it was more than a grudge: it was ambition. Absalom began to form a treasonable plot. Endowed with natural charm and charisma, he loafed about David's court and insinuated himself in the confidence of those who came to seek justice. He took their side, he sympathized with them about the delays, and he indicated that if he were the judge, things would be different. Absalom chose David's old capital of Hebron as the center of his rebellion and secretly gathered both plotters and innocent courtiers to his court. Absalom's diligent work to gain public support paid off. His partisans were many, his conspiracy was strong. He could not have hoped for an easier start. At the mere news of his plans, the broken old king David fled the capital, Jerusalem, and headed towards the river Jordan followed by those friends who were still faithful to his cause.

Among Absalom's confederates was David's counselor Ahithophel, whose reputation for wisdom was looked on as rivaling God. The news of this defection sent a chill to David's heart and brought forth a sudden agonized prayer, for David well knew the wisdom of Ahithophel.¹¹ One of David's friends on that dark night was Hushai - another counselor. Even in grief and despair David had an eye to strategy and encouraged those of his friends who could return to Jerusalem to act as spies. Hushai took a dangerous

and difficult mission. He was to pose as another counselor defecting from David and to do his best to thwart Ahithophel's plans without exposing his true loyalty. He did the job admirably. Ahithophel, having a good grasp of the current situation, advised attacking David with a sufficient force at once. The attack would focus on the person of David, with minimal bloodshed. With David dead, and a not very-bloody battle - opposition would fall apart and Absalom's ascendancy assured.

Ahithophel did not anticipate difficulty in winning - he knew or guessed that David was disorganized and depressed. And David was. He had marched out of Jerusalem weak and downcast. He bore patiently the taunts of old enemies. He felt that this was a judgment for his own sins. David was in no position to offer serious resistance or effective leadership. Joab and Abishai would have put up a fight, but the size of Ahithophel's proposed army and their advantage as pursuers and not flying refugees would have probably put the odds in Absalom's favor. This was Ahithophel's plan, but Absalom decided to hear what Hushai had to say. Hushai's job was to offer advice that would be pleasing to Absalom, but also advantageous to David. He started by attacking Ahithophel's correct view of David by substituting an earlier image of David - David the mighty warrior, surrounded by his mighty men, in a fighting, vengeful mood. Absalom had not interacted much with David in recent years, and thus this image would not have been unbelievable. He also pointed out the dangers of a night attack. Hushai then painted another picture. He advised Absalom to gather the entire nation in one overwhelming force. He drew word pictures that would appeal to Absalom's vanity; scenes of the entire nation dragging cities into rivers and overwhelming opposition by sheer numbers. By creating a false image of David, and appealing to Absalom's vanity, his advice would bring David the one thing he needed the most - time. The intentional flaw in the advice Hushai gave to Absalom was that all Israel would gather round him. Absalom's rebellion was strong, but there is no reason to think that he had the entire nation at his back. It would take time to gather forces and that would allow David breathing space to organize his army and recruit more partisans.¹²

Absalom now had to choose between the advice of Ahithophel and Hushai. David's prayer was heard, and providence had a hand in Absalom's choosing Hushai's advice; advice which appealed to his own vanity. Hushai then communicated with David's spies who ran a dangerous mission to report the state of affairs to David.

Our historical account gives no details of the maneuvers of Absalom or his success in raising men. We are instead given an account of the decisive battle.

During this whole course of events, David was a broken man. He felt penitent for his past sins, he did not feel justified in defending himself from even the insults of a crank (named Shimei) who wanted to harp on forgotten events (2 Samuel 16:5-12). He doubtless accused himself as responsible for the whole episode and may have felt remorse for his treatment of Absalom. When the battle came, David was in no position to lead. He was now a tender and protective parent whose sole thoughts were on the welfare of his rebellious son. He wanted to make up for his cold treatment of Absalom in the past by treating him tenderly now. David's partisans made him stay in the city, and his generals, especially Joab, were doubtless glad to not have to deal with his parental attach-

ment during the course of the battle. David made sure that his instructions about Absalom were heard by all. Joab cared not for the wishes of a grieving and distracted king; he was a warrior at heart and only cared about strategy. When he found Absalom at a disadvantage he promptly killed him. The battle was a victory for David. Joab, feeling that he had done a good day's work, returned to find David completely and unreasonably wrapped in grief about the death of Absalom. Yes, he had been his son, but more recently he had been a shameless rebel who was only too happy to kill his father. Joab was disgusted that the victory and end of the rebellion should go unrecognized by the king. David went out in public and recognized the victory.

With the rebel dead, the nation repented of its rebellion and David returned. But there was only peace on the surface. Even during the return of David, a bitter argument broke out between Judah and Israel. The tensions between the north and the south had shown themselves early in David's reign and now appeared towards it's close. In the wake of the rebellion a simple adventurer named Sheba had no difficulty in raising the standard of revolt, but once raised he found that Israel at large was apathetic and Joab had no difficulty in crushing the revolt. During the revolt of Sheba, David tried to substitute Absalom's general, Amasa, for the self-willed and independent Joab. But Joab was not so easily gotten rid of, and he shamelessly killed Amasa when a convenient opportunity arose. David stood in fear of Joab for most of his life. Joab was a useful servant and a powerful general who could count on the loyalty of his men. Joab was also independent and disobedient as well as being an unpunished murderer. David bided his time, left Joab alone, but did not forget his crimes.

David's Last Years and Death

The last years of David's life were somewhat quiet, but never completely free from trouble. There was a great outbreak of disease, a punishment for David and Israel's sin. As David's eventful life drew to a close, the question of succession arose. Like most eastern monarchs of that age, David had multiple wives and a good number of sons. He had promised the succession to Solomon, but another son (Adonijah) 'jumped the gun' and proclaimed himself king. Since this was not a rebellion per se, he was able to attract several of David's old friends and partisans, including Joab. When David was informed, he took steps to make known the heir of his choice - his son by Bathsheeba, Solomon. His proclamation defeated Adonijah's plans and he was left to fall on the mercy of the new king.

It was not long after this that David gave his deathbed instructions to his son. He charged him with carrying out the rewards and punishments that he was unable to administer in his reign.

Footnotes

1. See Cambridge, Clarke, on 2 Samuel 3:6
2. See Cambridge, Keil & Delitzsch (intro to section), on 2 Samuel 3:6.)
3. See 2 Samuel 5, 8, 10

4. There seem to be many semi-autonomous bands of Syrians in different areas who did not all pay tribute to David that were being used - 2 Sam 10:8, 16-19, or it may be that the Syrians paid tribute to David after this episode
5. In the battle of Cunaxa in (Xenophon Book I section X) the Greek mercenaries are so caught up in routing those facing them they are separated from the rest of the battle). In the battle of Edgehill (see Charles Oman 'A History of England' pages 383-384) the Royalist Cavalry routed their opponents and then chased them for miles, failing to support the Royalist infantry
6. See 2 Samuel 12:7
7. See Pulpit on 2 Samuel 11:16-21
8. See Keil & Delitzsch, Cambridge, Pulpit, on 2 Samuel 13:21
9. See Pulpit, Cambridge, Keil & Delitzsch, Coffman commentary on 2 Samuel 14:1 for the view that David was hostile to Absalom the whole time, and that Joab's actions were motivated by his own political forecasting. See Clarke, Barnes, Poole, on the same verse who support the opposite viewpoint
10. See Cambridge on 2 Samuel 14:32, Pulpit on 2 Samuel 14:33
11. There is a possibility that Ahithophel was Bathsheeba's grandfather, and some have suggested that betrayal of David was motivated by David's treatment of Bathsheeba and her husband. See Pulpit, Barnes, Coffman on 2 Samuel 11:3 for the theory, and Cambridge on the same verse for a rebuttal
12. See Cambridge, Keil & Delitzsch, Pulpit on 2 Samuel 17:14

References

- James Burton Coffman, "Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament". Abilene Christian University Press, Abilene, Texas, USA. (1983-1999)
- A. F. Kirkpatrick, (1896) 1 Samuel, Cambridge Bible Commentary Edited by J. J. S. Perowne
- Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible (1827)
- Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament (1866-1891)
- The Pulpit Commentary, Edited by Exell and Spence-Jones
- Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible
- Matthew Poole's Commentary, First Edition
- Charles Oman, "A History of England," Henry Holt & Company, New York (1900)
- Xenophon, Translated by H. G. Dakyns