

V. DAVID, AMNON & ABSALOM

2 SAMUEL 11-20

& 1 CHRONICLES 20:1-3

¹In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

²It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.

³David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." "So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house.

⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

⁶So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. ⁸Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. ⁹But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house.

¹⁰When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?"

¹¹Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are at Succoth; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing."

David's army, led by Joab (verse 14), and including Uriah the Hittite (verse 3), one of David's mighty warriors (see 2Samuel 23:8, 39), is away in Ammon besieging Rabbah. Presumably Eliam (verse 3), also one of David's 'warriors' (see 23:34) was with the army also.

We are introduced to 'Bathsheba' (verse 3), daughter of Eliam, and Uriah's wife. Her condition is stated (verse 4) because it indicates a good time for falling pregnant, and also because it demonstrates that the pregnancy could not be from Uriah at a time before he went to war.

David advises Uriah to relax and have intercourse with his wife ('wash your feet', verse 8). There is heavy irony in Uriah's determination not to sleep in his house while the ark has no permanent abode (see 7:2).

This a story of adultery, deception, and, in the end, calculated murder (verse 16), as David attempts to hide his sin. The Deuteronomists make no attempt to excuse David's behaviour. Even David is one who 'takes' (see the warning in 1Samuel 8:11-17).

The Chronicler (1Chronicles 20:1)

¹In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, Joab led out the army, ravaged the country of the Ammonites, and came and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

The Chronicler passes over chapters 11:2 - 12:25 and any mention of David's sin, and continues his account of David's campaigns at 2Samuel 12:26 (see page 166).

¹²Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die." ¹⁶As Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors. ¹⁷The men of the city came out and fought with Joab; and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well. ¹⁸Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting; ¹⁹and he instructed the messenger, "When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting, ²⁰then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall?' ²¹Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez?"

The story of Abimelech is found in Judges chapter 9:50-55.

Why did you go so near the wall?' then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.'"

²²So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. ²³The messenger said to David, "The men gained an advantage over us, and came out against us in the field; but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. ²⁴Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall; some of the king's servants are dead; and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also."

²⁵David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it.' And encourage him."

²⁶When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

But the thing that David had done displeased YHWH.

In the subsequent chapters disaster follows disaster as David's sons struggle to inherit David's throne. The Deuteronomists interpret these events as divine punishment for David's sin.

¹YHWH sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, one of them was rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up with himself and his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, instead he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." ⁵David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As YHWH lives, the man who has done this is a scoundrel; ⁶he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

⁷Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸I gave you your master's daughter, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the daughters of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹Why have you despised the word of YHWH, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with an Ammonite sword.

¹⁰Now therefore the sword will never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

¹¹Thus says YHWH: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. ¹²For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." ¹³David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against YHWH." Nathan said to David, "Now YHWH has transferred your sin; you shall not die. ¹⁴Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned YHWH, the child that is born to you shall die." ¹⁵Then Nathan went to his house.

God remained faithful to David, despite his faults. God remained faithful also to his covenant with the house of David.

It is David's disregard for God's law that is given here as the reason why there was so much 'trouble' in David's family (verse 11).

A dead king's harem went to his successor (verse 8). To claim the harem is to lay claim to the throne (see 2Samuel 3:7; 16:21; 1Kings 2:22).

'The sword will never depart from your house (see 11:25; also 14:23-29; 18:15; 1Kings 2:25).

David repents of his sin, but its consequences will play themselves out. Furthermore, the child conceived as a result of this unlawful liaison will not survive (see verse 14).

David attempts to change God's mind through fasting and prayer, but to no avail. The child dies, and, consistent with the theology of the Deuteronomists, this is seen as God's will: it is YHWH who 'struck the child' (verse 15). David sees the child's death as the atonement required by God. The following chapters, however, will make it clear that the violence unleashed by David's sin is not so simply contained.

There was as yet no 'house of YHWH' (temple; verse 20). If, as seems likely, this narrative comes from prophetic circles in the northern kingdom in the eighth century BC, the anachronism is an understandable one.

YHWH's fidelity to his commitment to David is shown in the conception and birth of another son, Solomon [שְׁלֹמֹה], for there is peace [שָׁלוֹם] between YHWH and the house of David. The intimate name given Solomon by God through Nathan (Jedidiah means 'beloved of YHWH') prepares us for the fact that it will be this son who will succeed his father as king.

15YHWH struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill. **16**David pleaded with God for the child; David fasted, and went in and lay all night on the ground. **17**The elders of his house stood beside him, urging him to rise from the ground; but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. **18**On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead; for they said, "While the child was still alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us; how then can we tell him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm."

19But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, he realised that the child was dead; and said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead."

20Then David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He went into the house of YHWH to worship; he then went to his own house; and when he asked, they set food before him and he ate. **21**Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you rose and ate food."

22He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows? YHWH may be gracious to me, and the child may live.'²³But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

24David comforted his wife Bathsheba. He went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he named him Solomon. YHWH loved him,²⁵ and sent a message by the prophet Nathan that he was to be called Jedidiah, by the grace of YHWH.

²⁶Now Joab fought against Rabbah of the Ammonites, and took the royal palace. ²⁷Joab sent messengers to David, and said, "I have fought against Rabbah; moreover, I have taken control of the water supply.

²⁸Now, then, gather the rest of the army together, and encamp against the city, and take it; or I myself will take the city, and it will be called by my name."

²⁹So David gathered the entire army and went to Rabbah, and fought against it and took it.

³⁰He took the crown of Milcom from his head; the weight of it was a talent of gold, and in it was a precious stone; and it was placed on David's head. He also brought forth the spoil of the city, a very great amount. ³¹He brought out the people who were in it, and set them to work with saws and iron picks and iron axes, or sent them to the brickworks. Thus he did to all the cities of the Ammonites. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem.

Verse 26 links back to 11:1 (page 162). Joab succeeds in taking the royal palace and the water supply to the city. He calls on David to bring the whole army out to take the city. David does so, and the Ammonites are reduced to slaves. The crown on the head of the Ammonite god Milcom (see 1 Kings 11:33) is placed on David's head as a sign of complete victory of YHWH, the god of Israel, over the pagan god.

The Chronicler (1 Chronicles 20:1-3)

The Chronicler omits the story of David's sin, and picks up the story from 2 Samuel 11:1 (see page 162).

¹Joab attacked Rabbah, and overthrew it. ²David took the crown of Milcom from his head; he found that it weighed a talent of gold, and in it was a precious stone; and it was placed on David's head. He also brought out the booty of the city, a very great amount. ³He brought out the people who were in it, and set them to work with saws and iron picks and axes. Thus David did to all the cities of the Ammonites. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem.

2Samuel includes here a long narrative concerning David's son, Absalom (13:1 - 19:9).

We have already been introduced to Amnon and Absalom:

Sons were born to David at Hebron: his firstborn was Amnon, of Ahinoam of Jezreel ... his third son was Absalom son of Maacah, daughter of King Talmi of Geshur.

– 2Samuel 3:2-3

If Solomon is to be king, we want to know what happened to his older brothers. This is the first time we hear of Absalom's sister (and Amnon's half-sister), Tamar.

Amnon is infatuated with Tamar. Jonadab, son of Shimeah, David's brother (called 'Shammah in 1Samuel 16:9; 17:13), suggests a way that Amnon can trick his father into allowing Tamar into Amnon's house, and Amnon dismisses the servants so that he can be alone with his half-sister.

The Chronicler

The Chronicler chooses to omit this whole section concerning Amnon and Absalom. He picks up the narrative again at 2Samuel 21:18-22 (see page 196).

¹Some time passed. David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. ²Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. ³But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. ⁴He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." ⁵Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" ⁶So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand." ⁷Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." ⁸So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. ⁹Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. ¹⁰Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother.

¹¹But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." ¹²She answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not commit such a sacrilege! ¹³As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." ¹⁴But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.

¹⁵Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, "Get out!" ¹⁶But she said to him, "No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me." But he would not listen to her. ¹⁷He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her." ¹⁸(Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.) So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her. ¹⁹But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went.

²⁰Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house.

²¹When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.

²²But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar.

Amnon rapes and then rejects his sister (verses 11-19).

Absalom is no help to his sister, but he hates his brother 'because he had raped his sister Tamar'(verse 22).

David is angry but refuses to punish his firstborn.

The scene is set for a serious breakdown of relationships within David's family.

Two years pass by. Finally an opportunity comes for Absalom to avenge his sister's rape.

He persuades David to let the whole family come for a special feast, and has his servants kill Amnon.

The other sons flee (verse 29).

Rumour reaches David that Absalom has killed all his brothers, but Jonadab (the same man who helped Amnon get Tamar into his house (see 13:3), assures David that the only victim of the violence was Amnon (verse 33).

²³After two full years Absalom had sheep-shearing at Baal-hazor, which is near Ophrah, and Absalom invited all the king's sons. ²⁴Absalom came to the king, and said, "Your servant has sheepshearing; will the king and his servants please go with your servant?" ²⁵But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, let us not all go, or else we will be burdensome to you." He pressed him, but he would not go but gave him his blessing. Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us." The king said to him, "Why should he go with you?" ²⁷But Absalom pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. Absalom made a feast like a king's feast.

²⁸Then Absalom commanded his servants, "Watch when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, 'Strike Amnon,' kill him. Do not be afraid; have I not myself commanded you? Be courageous and valiant." ²⁹So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king's sons rose, and each mounted his mule and fled.

³⁰While they were on the way, the report came to David that Absalom had killed all the king's sons, and not one of them was left. ³¹The king rose, tore his garments, and lay on the ground; and all his servants who were standing by tore their garments. ³²But Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah, said, "Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the king's sons; Amnon alone is dead. This has been determined by Absalom from the day Amnon raped his sister Tamar. ³³Now therefore, do not let my lord the king take it to heart, as if all the king's sons were dead; for Amnon alone is dead."

David's heart yearns for his absent son, Absalom

³⁴When the soldier who kept watch looked up, he saw many people coming along the Horonaim road by the side of the mountain. ³⁵Jonadab said to the king, "See, the king's sons have come; as your servant said, so it has come about." ³⁶As soon as he had finished speaking, the king's sons arrived, and raised their voices and wept; and the king and all his servants also wept very bitterly.

³⁷Absalom fled, and went to Talmi son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. David mourned for his son day after day. ³⁸Absalom, having fled to Geshur, stayed there three years. ³⁹The king's enthusiasm for marching out against him was spent; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon.

The arrival of his other sons confirms the message given David by Amnon's friend, Jonadab.

Absalom flees to his grandfather, Talmi, king of Geshur in Syria (see 2Samuel 3:3). He 'stayed there three years' (verse 38).

David has recovered from the death of Amnon his firstborn and is no longer thinking of marching out against Absalom (verse 39).

Behind this scene stands an ancient tribal law. If someone was killed, whether intentionally or accidentally, it was the obligation of a relative of the killed person to avenge the death by taking the life of the one responsible for the death. The one on whom the obligation fell was called the 'blood redeemer', (*gō'ēl haddām*). Not to avenge the death of one's blood relative was deemed a serious failure of responsibility. The dead person's blood, like the blood of Abel, 'cries out to God from the ground' (Genesis 4:10) and must be avenged. Gideon avenged those who killed his brother (Judges 8:18-21), as did Joab (2Samuel 3:27). It was their duty. His right was so important that he was considered guiltless (Numbers 35:26-28; Deuteronomy 19:5-6).

There is a dilemma here, for there is also a demand that a murderer be killed (see Exodus 21:12).

Joab could see that David was caught between his love for his son, Absalom, and his duty to avenge Amnon's death. He organises for a woman from Tekoa, two hours journey south of Bethlehem (and the birthplace of the prophet Amos) to go to the king and put a parallel situation to him. David is so moved that he promises her on oath that he will protect her son, even though he has killed his brother.

Note. Verses 15-17 belong here after verse 7.

¹Joab son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's mind was on Absalom. ²Joab sent to Tekoa and brought from there a wise woman. He said to her, "Pretend to be a mourner; put on mourning garments, do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead. ³Go to the king and speak to him as follows." And Joab put the words into her mouth. ⁴When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and did obeisance, and said, "Help, O king!" ⁵The king asked her, "What is your trouble?" She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. ⁶Your servant had two sons, and they fought with one another in the field; there was no one to part them, and one struck the other and killed him. ⁷Now the whole family has risen against your servant. They say, 'Give up the man who struck his brother, so that we may kill him for the life of his brother whom he murdered, even if we destroy the heir as well.' Thus they would quench my one remaining ember, and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth."

¹⁵Now I have come to say this to my lord the king because the people have made me afraid; your servant thought, 'I will speak to the king; it may be that the king will perform the request of his servant. ¹⁶For the king will hear, and deliver his servant from the hand of the man who would cut both me and my son off from the heritage of God.' ¹⁷Your servant thought, 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest'; for my lord the king is like the angel of God, discerning good and evil. YHWH your God be with you!"

⁸Then the king said to the woman, "Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you." (⁹The woman of Tekoa said to the king, "On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house; let the king and his throne be guiltless.") ¹⁰The king said, "If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again." ¹¹Then she said, "Please, may the king keep YHWH your God in mind, so that the avenger of blood may kill no more, and my son not be destroyed." He said, "As YHWH lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground."

¹²Then the woman said, "Please let your servant say something else to my lord the king." He said, "Speak." ¹³The woman said, "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again. ¹⁴We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up. But God will not take away a life; he will devise plans so as not to keep an out-cast banished forever from his presence.

¹⁸Then the king answered the woman, "Do not withhold from me anything I ask you." The woman said, "Let my lord the king speak."¹⁹The king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" The woman answered and said, "As surely as you live, my lord the king, one cannot turn right or left from anything that my lord the king has said. For it was your servant Joab who commanded me; it was he who put all these words into the mouth of your servant. ²⁰In order to change the course of affairs your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth."

The woman now draws the parallel with the situation of Absalom and Amnon. She is questioning the primitive tribal custom of revenge: 'God will not take away a life'(verse 14).

David suspects that Joab is behind the woman's action, and she confesses that it is so.

David gives in to Joab's request and Absalom is brought back to Jerusalem

However, David refuses to meet with Absalom (verse 24).

The mention of Absalom's hair (verse 26) prepares us for the strange circumstance of his death (see 18:9ff), with an ironic twist in light of David's oath in verse 11 – 'not one hair of your son will fall to the ground'.

Later we are told that Absalom did not have a son (18:18). Absalom names his daughter after his sister who was raped by Amnon (verse 27; see 13:22).

Absalom wants to meet with his father and tries to get Joab to meet him and take the message to David. When he finds that Joab ignores his request, he sets fire to Joab's field. This gets an instant response.

At last Absalom meets his father 'and the king kissed Absalom' (verse 33).

One begins to suspect that Joab wanted Absalom in Jerusalem so that he could keep an eye on him, in case Absalom's supporters might cause trouble.

²¹The king said to Joab, "Very well, I grant this; go, bring back the young man Absalom." ²²Joab prostrated himself with his face to the ground and did obeisance, and blessed the king; and Joab said, "Today your servant knows that I have found favour in your sight, my lord the king, in that the king has granted the request of his servant." ²³So Joab set off, went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. ²⁴The king said, "Let him go to his own house; he is not to come into my presence." So Absalom went to his own house, and did not come into the king's presence. ²⁵Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. ²⁶When he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, one hundred shekels by the king's weight. ²⁷There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a beautiful woman. ²⁸So Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, without coming into the king's presence. ²⁹Then Absalom sent for Joab to send him to the king; but Joab would not come to him. He sent a second time, but Joab would not come. ³⁰Then he said to his servants, "Look, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. ³¹Then Joab rose and went to Absalom at his house, and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" ³²Absalom answered Joab, "Look, I sent word to you: Come here, that I may send you to the king with the question, 'Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still.' Now let me go into the king's presence; if there is guilt in me, let him kill me!" ³³Then Joab went to the king and told him; and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom.

¹After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run ahead of him. ²Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the road into the gate; and when anyone brought a suit before the king for judgment, Absalom would call out and say, "From what city are you?" When the person said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel," ³Absalom would say, "Look, your claims are good and right; but you won't get a hearing from the king." ⁴Absalom said moreover, "If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice." ⁵Whenever people came near to do obeisance to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of them, and kiss them. ⁶Thus Absalom did to every Israelite who came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel.

⁷At the end of four years Absalom said to the king, "Please let me go to Hebron and pay the vow that I have made to YHWH.

⁸For your servant made a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram: If YHWH will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will worship YHWH in Hebron." ⁹The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he got up, and went to Hebron.

¹⁰But Absalom sent secret agents throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then shout: Absalom has become king at Hebron!" ¹¹Two hundred men from Jerusalem went with Absalom; they were invited guests, and they went in their innocence, knowing nothing of the matter.

¹²While Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city Giloh. The conspiracy grew in strength, and the army with Absalom kept increasing.

Absalom surrounds himself with a bodyguard appropriate for a king, and then 'stole the hearts of the people of Israel' (verse 6) by putting himself between the king and those who came to the king seeking justice, and declaring that if he were king he would guarantee the dispensing of favourable judgments.

Absalom spent four years secretly sowing seeds of sedition (verse 7). He then got permission to leave Jerusalem and go to Hebron where he was born (see 2:2-3). It is reasonable to suspect that the people of Hebron were unhappy at being superseded by Jerusalem. It seems more likely that 'Israel' and 'Israelite' in this passage includes Judah and that the revolt included Judah. We are not given sufficient evidence to account for such widespread dissatisfaction with David's reign.

Ahithophel is the grandfather of Bathsheba (see 11:3 and 23:34). Giloh is in the hill country of Judah (see Joshua 15:51), possibly somewhere southwest of Hebron.

When David is told that ‘the hearts of the Israelites have gone after Absalom’ (verse 13), he decides not to resist. He is placing his trust in YHWH. He decides also to leave Jerusalem, so that the city will be spared. He will not defend his kingship. If he is meant to be king YHWH will see to it.

The note about the concubines (verse 16) recalls 12:11 and looks forward to 16:20-22.

His personal army leaves with him as do a number of foreign troops that are committed to him: the Cherethites (verse 18; see 1Samuel 30:14; 2Samuel 8:18), the Pelethites (verse 18; see 2Samuel 8:18), and a group of Philistine mercenaries from Gath (verse 19), led by Ittai. He will later command a third of David’s army (see 18:2).

David’s largeness of heart is illustrated by his giving Ittai permission to stay behind and join Absalom (verses 19-20). Ittai refused to part from David.

¹³A messenger came to David, saying, “The hearts of the Israelites have gone over to Absalom.” ¹⁴David said to all his officials who were with him at Jerusalem, “Get up! Let us flee, or there will be no escape for us from Absalom. Hurry, or he will soon overtake us, and bring disaster down upon us, and attack the city with the edge of the sword.” ¹⁵The king’s officials said to the king, “Your servants are ready to do whatever our lord the king decides.” ¹⁶So the king left, followed by all his household, except ten concubines whom he left behind to look after the house. ¹⁷The king left, followed by all his servants; and they stopped at the last house. (¹⁸All his officials passed by him; and all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath, passed on before the king.) ¹⁹Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, “Why are you also coming with us? Go back, and stay with the king; for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your home. ²⁰You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us, while I go wherever I can? Go back, and take your kinsfolk with you; and may YHWH show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.” ²¹But Ittai answered the king, “As YHWH lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.” ²²David said to Ittai, “Go then, march on.” So Ittai the Gittite marched on, with all his men and all the children who were with him.

²³The whole country wept aloud as all the people passed by; the king crossed the Wadi Kidron, and all the people moved on toward the wilderness.

The ark stays in the city

²⁴Abiathar came up, and Zadok also, with all the Levites, carrying the ark of the covenant of God. They set down the ark of God, until the army had all passed out of the city. ²⁵Then the king said to Zadok, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the eyes of YHWH, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. ²⁶But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him." ²⁷The king also said to the priest Zadok, "Look, go back to the city in peace, you and Abiathar, with your two sons, Ahimaaz your son, and Jonathan son of Abiathar. ²⁸See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." ²⁹So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there.

³⁰But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, with his head covered and walking barefoot; and all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went. ³¹David was told that Ahithophel was among the conspirators with Absalom. And David said, "YHWH, I pray you, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."

³²When David came to the summit, where God was worshipped, Hushai the Archite came to meet him with his coat torn and earth on his head. ³³David said to him, "If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me. ³⁴But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, 'I will be your servant, O king; as I have been your father's servant in time past, so now I will be your servant,' then you will defeat for me the counsel of Ahithophel. ³⁵The priests Zadok and Abiathar will be with you there. So whatever you hear from the king's house, tell it to the priests Zadok and Abiathar. ³⁶Their two sons are with them there, Zadok's son Ahimaaz and Abiathar's son Jonathan; and by them you shall report to me everything you hear." ³⁷So Hushai, David's Friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem.

Abiathar has been with David since he left Saul to join David in exile (see 1Samuel 22:20). Zadok was first mentioned in 2Samuel 8:17 where he is mentioned alongside Abiathar. This is only the second time he appears, and it is he who seems to have the leading role in relation to the ark. David wants the ark to remain in Jerusalem. If YHWH wants to save David, YHWH will do so. He also looks to the priests to let him know what is happening back in the city.

'Ahithophel' means 'my brother folly'.

The Archite clan lived in the area southwest of Bethel (Joshua 16:2). David tells Hushai to go back to Jerusalem, ingratiate himself with Ahithophel and report Absalom's plans to the priests, who will see that David is informed.

The king's 'Friend' had a special role in the king's entourage (see 1Kings 4:5).

In chapter 9 David told Ziba to care for Jonathan's crippled son, Meribbaal. He meets David here with some refreshments, and he tells David that Meribbaal is in Jerusalem, convinced that now he is going to inherit his father's kingdom. David rewards him by giving him Saul's estate.

As David made his way down into the Jordan valley, another of Saul's household, Shimei, from the other side of the valley, shouts curses at David. David's cousin, Abishai, asks permission to kill the intruder, but David rejects his request. He sees all that is happening as being the will of YHWH, a just retribution for his sins. David casts himself upon God's mercy (verse 12).

Psalm 3 refers to David's escape.

¹When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Ziba the steward of Meribbaal met him, with a couple of donkeys saddled, carrying two hundred loaves of bread, one hundred bunches of raisins, one hundred of summer fruits, and a skin of wine. ²The king said to Ziba, "Why have you brought these?" Ziba answered, "The donkeys are for the king's household to ride, the bread and summer fruit for the servants to eat, and the wine is for those to drink who faint in the wilderness." ³The king said, "And where is your master's son?" Ziba said to the king, "He remains in Jerusalem; for he said, "Today the house of Israel will give me back my grandfather's kingdom." ⁴Then the king said to Ziba, "All that belonged to Meribbaal is now yours." Ziba said, "I do obeisance; let me find favour in your sight, my lord the king."

⁵When King David came to Bahurim, a man of the family of the house of Saul came out whose name was Shimei son of Gera; he came out cursing. ⁶He threw stones at David and at all his servants, and all the army and all the warriors on his right and on his left. ⁷Shimei shouted while he cursed, "Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! ⁸YHWH has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and YHWH has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood." ⁹Then Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head." ¹⁰But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because YHWH has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'" ¹¹David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "My own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Let him alone, and let him curse; for YHWH has bidden him. ¹²It may be that YHWH will look on my distress, and YHWH will repay me with good for this cursing of me today." ¹³So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the opposite hillside and cursed as he went, throwing stones and flinging dust at him. ¹⁴The king and all the people who were with him arrived weary at the Jordan; and there he refreshed himself.

Absalom breaks all ties with his father

¹⁵Now Absalom and all the Israelites came to Jerusalem; Ahithophel was with him.

¹⁶When Hushai the Archite, David's Friend, came to Absalom, Hushai said to Absalom, "Long live the king! Long live the king!" ¹⁷Absalom said to Hushai, "Is this your loyalty to your friend? Why did you not go with your friend?" ¹⁸Hushai said to Absalom, "No; but the one whom YHWH and this people and all the Israelites have chosen, his I will be, and with him I will remain. ¹⁹Moreover, whom should I serve? Should it not be his son? Just as I have served your father, so I will serve you."

²⁰Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, "Give us your counsel; what shall we do?" ²¹Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in to your father's concubines, the ones he has left to look after the house; and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened." ²²So they pitched a tent for Absalom upon the roof; and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel.

²³Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the oracle of God; so all the counsel of Ahithophel was esteemed, both by David and by Absalom.

Absalom has the bulk of the people of Israel behind him. He also is being advised by Ahithophel (verse 15; see 15:12).

Following the plan inspired by David, Hushai, David's 'friend' (see 15:37) ingratiates himself with Absalom (verses 16-20; see 15:32-35).

Absalom, on Ahithophel's advice, publicly breaks all bonds with his father by 'going in' to David's harem (see 12:11; 15:16). In doing so he is making a public claim to the throne. We are reminded of the curse that fell on Reuben when he behaved in the same way to his father Jacob (see Genesis 35:22; 49:3-4).

Verse 23 underlines Ahithophel's abuse of his power as counsellor.

Ahithophel advises Absalom to strike immediately.

Absalom seeks confirmation of the plan from Hushai, who knows the condition of David and his warriors. Cleverly, Hushai sows doubt in Absalom's mind, reminding him of the military prowess of David and his commanders.

He advises Absalom to wait and put the whole country on a war footing, so that David will have nowhere to hide.

¹Moreover Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will set out and pursue David tonight. ²I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged, and throw him into a panic; and the entire army who are with him will flee. I will strike down only the king, ³and I will bring all the army back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the army will be at peace." ⁴The advice pleased Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

⁵Then Absalom said, "Call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear too what he has to say." ⁶When Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, "This is what Ahithophel has said; shall we do as he advises? If not, you tell us." ⁷Then Hushai said to Absalom, "This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good." ⁸Hushai continued, "You know that your father and his men are warriors, and that they are enraged, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. Besides, your father is expert in war; he will not spend the night with the troops. ⁹Even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits, or in some other place. And when some of our troops fall at the first attack, whoever hears it will say, 'There has been a slaughter among the troops who follow Absalom.' ¹⁰Then even the valiant warrior, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt with fear; for all Israel knows that your father is a warrior, and that those who are with him are valiant warriors. ¹¹My counsel is that all Israel be gathered to you, from Dan to Beer-sheba, like the sand by the sea for multitude, and that you go to battle in person. ¹²So we shall come upon him in whatever place he may be found, and we shall light on him as the fog descends on the ground; and he will not survive, nor will any of those with him. ¹³If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city, and we shall drag it into the valley, until not even a pebble is to be found there."

David escapes across the Jordan

¹⁴Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." (For YHWH had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that YHWH might bring ruin on Absalom.)

¹⁵Then Hushai said to the priests Zadok and Abiathar, "This is how Ahithophel counselled Absalom and the elders of Israel; and this is the counsel I gave. ¹⁶Therefore send quickly and tell David, 'Do not lodge tonight at the fords of the wilderness, but cross over straight away; otherwise the king and all the people who are with him will be swallowed up.'" ¹⁷Jonathan and Ahimaaz were waiting at En-rogel; a servant girl used to go and tell them, and they would go and tell King David; for they could not risk being seen entering the city. ¹⁸But a soldier saw them, and told Absalom; so both of them went away quickly, and came to the house of a man at Bahurim, who had a well in his courtyard; and they went down into it. ¹⁹The man's wife took a covering, stretched it over the well's mouth, and spread out grain on it so that nothing would be noticed. ²⁰When Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house, they said, "Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?" The woman said to them, "They have crossed over the brook of water." And when they had searched and could not find them, they returned to Jerusalem. ²¹After they had gone, the men came up out of the well, and went and told King David. They said to David, "Go and cross the water quickly; for thus and so has Ahithophel counselled against you."

²²So David and all the people who were with him set out and crossed the Jordan; by day-break not one was left who had not crossed the Jordan. ²³When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order, and hanged himself; he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.

Absalom is impressed with Hushai's counsel. The Deuteronomists see this as YHWH's doing. This gains some time, but, just in case, Hushai sends an urgent message to David to cross the Jordan to a more secure defensive position.

So Hushai gives a message to the priests, who relay it, through a servant girl, to their sons who are outside the city where the valleys of Hinnom and Kidron meet. It was up to them to get the message to David (see 15:36). Things nearly go astray except for the cunning of a woman at Bahurim.

Ahithophel sees in the rejection of his advice a sign that the rebellion will fail. He can expect from David the fate of a traitor, and chooses to take his own life. In the Newer Testament Matthew may have had this scene in mind when he composed the narrative of Judas's suicide (Matthew 27:5).

Mahanaim was the former royal residence of Saul's son, Ishbaal, in Gilead (see 2Samuel 2:8).

Absalom appointed a cousin, Amasa (see 19:13), as commander-in-chief of his army. The army crossed the Jordan into Gilead to confront David.

David has had time to organise a number of alliances: with Shobi from Ammon (mentioned here for the first time); with Machir, who was looking after Meribbaal, Jonathan's crippled son, at the time when David called Meribbaal to Jerusalem (see 9:4), and with Barzillai, a local chief in Gilead (also mentioned for the first time; see 19:31-40).



²⁴Then David came to Mahanaim, while Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel. ²⁵Now Absalom had set Amasa over the army in the place of Joab. Amasa was the son of a man named Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had married Abigail daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother. ²⁶The Israelites and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.

²⁷When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Machir son of Ammiel from Lo-debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, ²⁸brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, ²⁹honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat; for they said, "The troops are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness."

¹Then David mustered the men who were with him, and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. ²And David divided the army into three groups: one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai son of Zeruah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite. The king said to the men, "I myself will also go out with you." ³But the men said, "You must not go out. For if we retreat, they will not care about us. If half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us; therefore it is better that you help us from within the city." ⁴The king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood atop the gate, while the entire army marched out by hundreds and by thousands. ⁵The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "For my sake protect young Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. ⁶The army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷The army of Israel was defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. ⁹Absalom outstript the servants of David, riding on his mule. But as the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. ¹⁰A man saw it, and told Joab, "I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." ¹¹Joab said to the man who told him, "What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt." ¹²But the man said to Joab, "Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not raise my hand against the king's son; for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, saying: For my sake protect young Absalom!"

David organises his army for the battle against Absalom's troops. Since David is in Mahanaim, and Absalom's army is in Gilead (17:24), the 'forest of Ephraim' (verse 6) is probably east of the Jordan.

David is persuaded to stay out of the battle. He instructs the army to 'deal gently' with Absalom (verse 5). Those responsible for the narrative are making sure that no blame falls to David for the death of Absalom.

Absalom is caught by his hair in the branches of a tree (verse 9). The man who saw him there respects David's wishes.

Joab dislodges Absalom from the tree, and then feels no compunction in having Absalom killed. The trumpet sounds the end of the battle. Absalom is buried and his body covered with a heap of stones. This is the form of burial for an accursed man (see Joshua 7:26; 8:29; 10:27).

Verse 18 refers to another monument in the Valley of the Kings near Jerusalem. In 14:27 we learned that Absalom had three sons!

Joab sends a Cushite to take the news to David. Ahimaaz, the son of Zadok the priest, first mentioned in 15:27, insists on taking the news. He, along with the son of Abiathar, was given the role of keeping David in touch with what was going on in Jerusalem while David was attempting to escape from Absalom (see 15:36).

¹³On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof."

¹⁴Joab said, "I will not waste time like this with you." He took three sticks in his hand, and thrust them against Absalom's chest, while he was still alive in the oak. ¹⁵And ten young men, Joab's armour-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

¹⁶Then Joab sounded the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained the troops.

¹⁷They took Absalom, threw him into a great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones. Meanwhile all the Israelites fled to their homes. (¹⁸Now while he was still alive, Absalom had erected for himself a pillar in the Valley of the Kings, for he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance"; he called the pillar by his own name. It is called Absalom's Monument to this day.)

¹⁹Then Ahimaaz son of Zadok said, "Let me run, and carry tidings to the king that YHWH has delivered him from the power of his enemies." ²⁰Joab said to him, "You are not to carry tidings today; you may carry tidings another day, but today you shall not do so". (He said this because the king's son was dead.) ²¹Then Joab said to a Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran. ²²Then Ahimaaz son of Zadok said again to Joab, "Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why will you run, my son, seeing that you have no reward for the tidings?" ²³"Come what may," he said, "I will run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the Plain, and outran the Cushite.

David hears of Absalom's death

²⁴Now David was sitting between the two gates. The sentinel on the roof of the gate went to the wall, looked out, and he saw a man running alone. ²⁵The sentinel shouted and told the king. The king said, "If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth." He kept coming, and drew near. ²⁶Then the sentinel saw another man running; and the sentinel called to the gatekeeper and said, "See, another man running alone!" The king said, "He also is bringing tidings." ²⁷The sentinel said, "I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz son of Zadok." The king said, "He is a good man, and comes with good tidings."

²⁸Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, "All is well!" He prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground, and said, "Blessed be YHWH your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king." ²⁹The king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I do not know what it was." ³⁰The king said, "Turn aside, and stand here." So he turned aside, and stood still.

³¹Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For YHWH has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." ³²The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man."

³³The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

David is waiting on news of the battle. Ahimaaz arrives first, speaks of the victory but does not know about Absalom's death.

The Cushite tells David that his son was killed.

David is overwhelmed with grief. Verse 33 follows the Vulgate numbering. It is chapter 19 verse 1 in the Hebrew and Greek Versions.

Joab persuades David to cease his mourning and acknowledge the bravery and loyalty of the army who have put their lives on the line to defend David.

¹It was told Joab, "The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom."²So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops; for the troops heard that day, "The king is grieving for his son."

³The troops stole into the city that day as soldiers steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. ⁴The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" ⁵Then Joab came into the house to the king, and said, "Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your officers who have saved your life today, and the lives of your sons and your daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, ⁶for love of those who hate you and for hatred of those who love you. You have made it clear today that commanders and officers are nothing to you; for I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. ⁷So go out at once and speak kindly to your servants; for I swear by YHWH, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night; and this will be worse for you than any disaster that has come upon you from your youth until now." ⁸Then the king got up and took his seat in the gate. The troops were all told, "See, the king is sitting in the gate"; and all the troops came before the king.

The Israelites, who had supported Absalom (see 2Samuel 17:11; 18:6) now remember David's exploits and realise they will have to do something to show their support.

Meanwhile, all the Israelites had fled to their homes. ⁹All the people were disputing throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies, and saved us from the hand of the Philistines; and now he has fled out of the land because of Absalom. ¹⁰But Absalom, whom we anointed over us, is dead in battle. Now therefore why do you say nothing about bringing the king back?"

¹¹King David sent this message to the priests Zadok and Abiathar, "Say to the elders of Judah, 'Why should you be the last to bring the king back to his house? The talk of all Israel has come to the king. ¹²You are my kin, you are my bone and my flesh; why then should you be the last to bring back the king?' ¹³And say to Amasa, 'Are you not my bone and my flesh? So may God do to me, and more, if you are not the commander of my army from now on, in place of Joab.'" ¹⁴Amasa swayed the hearts of all the people of Judah as one, and they sent word to the king, "Return, both you and all your servants."

¹⁵So the king came back to the Jordan; and the Judahites came to Gilgal to meet the king and to conduct him across the Jordan. ¹⁶Shimei son of Gera, the Benjaminite, from Bahurim, hurried to come down with the people of Judah to meet King David; ¹⁷with him were a thousand men from Benjamin. But it was Ziba, the steward of the house of Saul, with his fifteen sons and his twenty servants, waded through the Jordan ahead of the king, ¹⁸while the crossing was taking place, to bring over the king's household, and to do his pleasure. Shimei son of Gera fell down before the king, as he was about to cross the Jordan, ¹⁹and said to the king, "May my lord not hold me guilty or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem; may the king not bear it in mind.

²⁰For your servant knows that I have sinned; therefore, see, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph to come down to meet my lord the king." ²¹Abishai son of Zeruiah answered, "Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed YHWH's anointed?" ²²But David said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should today become an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?" ²³The king said to Shimei, "You shall not die." And the king gave him his oath.

Having heard that the people of Israel are disposed to welcome him, David uses the priests to mediate for him with 'the elders of Judah'(verse 11).

As a gesture of reconciliation he also offers his kinsman, Amasa, who was commander-in-chief under Absalom (see 17:25) to continue in that role under him (verse 13). In this way he also shows his disapproval of Joab's killing of Absalom.

David came back to the Jordan where the people from Judah welcomed him. Among them was Shimei, who had cursed David when David was making his escape from Jerusalem (16:5-7). He admits his guilt and is spared. Ziba (see 16:1) was there, too.

'Adversary'(verse 22) translates the Hebrew שָׁטָן (šāṭān; see 1Kings 11:14).

Saul's grandson, Meribbaal (see 2Samuel 2; 16:1-4), also came down to meet David. He tries to undo the impression given to David by Ziba (16:3-4).

²⁴Meribbaal grandson of Saul also came down to meet the king; he had not taken care of his feet, or trimmed his beard, or washed his clothes, from the day the king left until the day he came back in safety. ²⁵When he came from Jerusalem to meet the king, the king said to him, "Why did you not go with me, Meribbaal?" ²⁶He answered, "My lord, O king, my servant deceived me; for your servant said to him, 'Saddle a donkey for me, so that I may ride on it and go with the king.' For your servant is lame. ²⁷He has slandered your servant to my lord the king. But my lord the king is like the angel of God; do therefore what seems good to you. ²⁸For all my father's house were doomed to death before my lord the king; but you set your servant among those who eat at your table. What further right have I, then, to appeal to the king?" ²⁹The king said to him, "Why speak any more of your affairs? I have decided: you and Ziba shall divide the property." ³⁰Meribbaal said to the king, "Let him take it all, since my lord the king has arrived home safely."

³¹Now Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogelim; he went on with the king to escort him over the Jordan.

³²Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. ³³The king said to Barzillai, "Come over with me, and I will provide for you in Jerusalem at my side."³⁴But Barzillai said to the king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? ³⁵Today I am eighty years old; can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? ³⁶Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king recompense me with such a reward? ³⁷Please let your servant return, so that I may die in my own town, near the graves of my father and my mother.

³⁷But here is your servant Chimham; let him go over with my lord the king; and do for him whatever seems good to you."

³⁸The king answered, "Chimham shall go over with me, and I will do for him whatever seems good to you; and all that you desire of me I will do for you." ³⁹Then all the people crossed over the Jordan, and the king crossed over; the king kissed Barzillai and blessed him. Then Barzillai returned to his own home.

⁴⁰The king went on to Gilgal, and Chimham went on with him. The entire army of Judah, and also half the army of Israel, brought the king on his way.

Barzillai, who had helped David in Gilead (see 17:27) accompanied David to the Jordan. David invited him to cross over into Judah and stay with him.

Barzillai declines the offer, but gives David his son, Chimham.

David crosses the Jordan, accompanied by 'all the army of Judah, and also half the army of Israel'(verse 40).

The people of Israel, comprising ten of the tribes, are jealous of the fact that the people of Judah are making a special claim on David.

⁴¹Then all the men of Israel came to the king, and said to him, "Why have our kindred the men of Judah stolen you away, and brought the king and his household over the Jordan, and all David's men with him?" ⁴²The men of Judah answered the men of Israel, "Because the king is near of kin to us. Why then are you angry over this matter? Have we eaten at all at the king's expense? Or has he given us any gift?" ⁴³But the men of Israel answered the men of Judah, "We have ten shares in the king, and in David also we have more than you. Why then did you despise us? Were we not the first to speak of bringing back our king?" But the words of the men of Judah were more determined than the words of the men of Israel.

Sheba, who is from Benjamin, the tribe of Saul, takes the dispute further into revolt.

¹Now a scoundrel named Sheba son of Bichri, a Benjaminite, happened to be there. He sounded the trumpet and cried out, "We have no portion in David, no share in the son of Jesse! Everyone to your tents, O Israel!" ²So all the men of Israel withdrew from David and followed Sheba son of Bichri; but the men of Judah followed their king steadfastly from the Jordan to Jerusalem. ³David came to his house at Jerusalem; and the king took the ten concubines whom he had left to look after the house, and put them in a house under guard, and provided for them, but did not go in to them. So they were shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood.

David returns to Jerusalem escorted by the people of Judah.

4Then the king said to Amasa, "Call the men of Judah together to me within three days, and be here yourself."

5Amasa went to summon Judah; but he delayed beyond the set time that had been appointed him. **6**David said to Abishai, "Now Sheba son of Bichri will do us more harm than Absalom; take your lord's servants and pursue him, or he will find fortified cities for himself, and escape from us." **7**Joab's men went out after him, along with the Cherethites, the Pelethites, and all the warriors; they went out from Jerusalem to pursue Sheba son of Bichri. **8**When they were at the large stone that is in Gibeon, Amasa came to meet them. Now Joab was wearing a soldier's garment and over it was a belt with a sword in its sheath fastened at his waist; as he went forward it fell out.

9Joab said to Amasa, "Is it well with you, my brother?" And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. **10**But Amasa did not notice the dagger in Joab's hand; Joab struck him in the belly so that his entrails poured out on the ground, and he died. He did not strike a second blow. Then Joab and his brother Abishai pursued Sheba son of Bichri. **11**And one of Joab's men took his stand by Amasa, and said, "Whoever favours Joab, and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab." **12**Amasa lay wallowing in his blood on the highway, and the man saw that all the army was stopping. Since he saw that all who came by him were stopping, he carried Amasa from the highway into a field, and threw a garment over him. **13**Once he was removed from the highway, all the people went on after Joab to pursue Sheba son of Bichri.

David tells his new commander-in-chief, Amasa (see 19:13) to muster the troops, but he is slow doing so.

David then tells Abishai to pursue Sheba. Joab goes with his brother.

They encounter Amasa at Gibeon, and Joab kills him. The narrator is keen to lay the blame on Joab, and to exclude David from any accusation of treachery.

The pursuit of Sheba continues.

Unable to gather support, Sheba goes to the extreme north of Israel. Joab lays siege to the city.

Determined to save her city a woman has Sheba killed and his head thrown from the battlements into Joab's camp. Joab lifts the siege and returns to Jerusalem.

Even though the Israelites do not rally to Sheba, his revolt warns us of the fragility of the Israel-Judah alliance. We are being prepared for its collapse at the death of David's heir.

¹⁴Sheba passed through all the tribes of Israel to Abel of Beth-maacah; and all the Bichrites assembled, and followed him inside.

¹⁵Joab's forces came and besieged him in Abel of Beth-maacah; they threw up a siege-ramp against the city, and it stood against the rampart. Joab's forces were battering the wall to break it down. ¹⁶Then a wise woman called from the city, "Listen! Listen! Tell Joab, 'Come here, I want to speak to you.'"

¹⁷He came near her; and the woman said, "Are you Joab?" He answered, "I am." Then she said to him, "Listen to the words of your servant." He answered, "I am listening."

¹⁸Then she said, "They used to say in the old days, 'Let them inquire at Abel'; and so they would settle a matter. ¹⁹I am one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel; you seek to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel; why will you swallow up the heritage of YHWH?" ²⁰Joab answered, "Far be it from me, far be it, that I should swallow up or destroy! ²¹That is not the case! But a man of the hill country of Ephraim, called Sheba son of Bichri, has lifted up his hand against King David; give him up alone, and I will withdraw from the city." The woman said to Joab, "His head shall be thrown over the wall to you." ²²Then the woman went to all the people with her wise plan. And they cut off the head of Sheba son of Bichri, and threw it out to Joab. So he blew the trumpet, and they dispersed from the city, and all went to their homes, while Joab returned to Jerusalem to the king.

We hear that Joab is restored as commander-in-chief. This list duplicates the list in 8:16-18 with a few changes,

²³Now Joab was in command of all the army of Israel; Benaiah son of Jehoiada was in command of the Cherethites and the Pelethites; ²⁴Adoram was in charge of the labour force; Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was the recorder; ²⁵Sheva was secretary; Zadok and Abiathar were priests; ²⁶and Ira the Jairite was also David's priest.

