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## Israel and Judah: 10. The End of Absalom

by David Sielaff, June 2015

Read the accompanying [Newsletter for June 2015](#)

Israel and Judah: 10

The End  
 of  
 Absalom

**THE SITUATION:** Absalom made himself king and entered the capital of Jerusalem. King David fled Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley, and went over the Mount of Olives. He, his troops, and followers continued east toward the Jordan River. People in Israel and Judah begin to choose which king to give their allegiance: Absalom or to God's anointed, King David. All these events are part of the prophet Nathan's declaration of God's punishments for David's adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

Absalom is an unwitting performer in David's punishments. King David had God's 5-fold punishment put upon him, his family, and his kingdom as presented in 2 Samuel 12:10–12. I repeat the list of punishments from last article, with an update:<sup>a</sup>

- [1] **Future.** David's descendants (not just those on the throne) will be under threat of the sword "for the eon."
- [2] **In process.** Evil shall strike at David from his own house, meaning his own family.
- [3] **Future.** David's own "wives" will be seized and sexually violated — in public.
- [4] **Accomplished.** David's secret sins regarding his affair with Bathsheba will become public knowledge immediately.
- [5] **Accomplished.** The son to be born (that very day of Nathan's declaration) shall die.

David's secret sins were made public when Nathan revealed the punishments. David's son with Bathsheba

<sup>a</sup> Absalom's actions led to his rebellion against David in "[Israel and Judah: 9. Rape and Murder.](#)" This series of articles begins with the death of Saul and the enthronement of David as God's anointed king of Judah in "[Israel and Judah: 1. Saul and David.](#)"

died according to God's judgment. Now [2] is coming to pass, and David knows more punishments are to come. This is likely why King David seems reflective and submissive while enduring his punishments. Nevertheless, while under God's punishment, as anyone would do, David tries to minimize the effects as much as possible.

As David travels east, his entourage is met by a former servant of King Saul's and current servant of Mephibosheth, the son of David's beloved friend, Prince Jonathan, son of Saul. Recall that Mephibosheth would be next in line as heir to the throne through Saul's bloodline.<sup>b</sup>

### ***TEXT: Ziba and Shimei***

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#### **2 Samuel 16:1–14**

<sup>1</sup> David had passed a little beyond the summit, when Ziba the lad of Mephibosheth came toward him with a team of saddled donkeys, and on them two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred clusters of raisins, a hundred cakes of summer dates, and a crock of wine.

<sup>2</sup> The king asked Ziba, "**What are you doing with these?**" Ziba replied, "**The donkeys are for the king's household to ride on; the bread and the summer dates are for the lads to eat; and the wine is for the faint in the wilderness to drink.**"

<sup>3</sup> Then the king asked, "**And where is the son of your lord?**" Ziba replied to the king, "**Oh, he is staying in Jerusalem, for he thinks, Today the house of Israel shall restore to me the kingship of my grandfather.**"

<sup>4</sup> So the king said to Ziba, "**From now on all that Mephibosheth has belongs to you.**" And Ziba replied, "**I bow low; may I find grace in your eyes, my lord the king.**"

<sup>5</sup> When king David approached Bahurim, just then a man of the family of the house of Saul came forth from there; his name was Shimei son of Gera. He was going forth and was maledicting [cursing] as he came forth. <sup>6</sup> He threw stones at David and at all the courtiers of king David, while all the soldiers and all the masters of war [mighty men] were at his right and at his left. <sup>7</sup> And thus spoke Shimei in his maledicting [cursing]:

**"Forth! Forth, man of bloodguilt, man of worthlessness! <sup>8</sup> Yahweh has brought back on you all the bloodguilts of the house of Saul in whose stead you have reigned. Yahweh is giving the kingship into the hand of your son Absalom; and here you are in your evil predicament because you are a man of bloodguilts!"**

<sup>9</sup> Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king, "**Why should this dead cur maledict [curse] my lord the king? Let me now cross over, and let me take off his head!**" <sup>10</sup> But the king replied, "**What is it to me and to you, sons of Zeruiah? Leave him alone! Thus he is maledicting [cursing] because Yahweh told him, 'Maledict [curse] David!' So who should say, 'For what reason have you done so?'**" <sup>11</sup> Then David said to Abishai and to all his courtiers,

**"If my own son, who came forth from my internal parts, is seeking my soul, how much more so then this Benjamite! Leave him alone and let him maledict [curse] because Yahweh told him to.**

<sup>12</sup> **Perhaps Yahweh will look on my humiliation, and Yahweh will restore to me goodness instead of his malediction [cursing] on this day."**

<sup>13</sup> So David went along the road with his men, while Shimei was walking on the angular side of the hill to go abreast of him. He maledicted [cursed] and threw stones abreast of him; he also threw dirt. <sup>14</sup> Then the king and all the soldiers with him came to the Jordan, faint with thirst, and they refreshed themselves there.

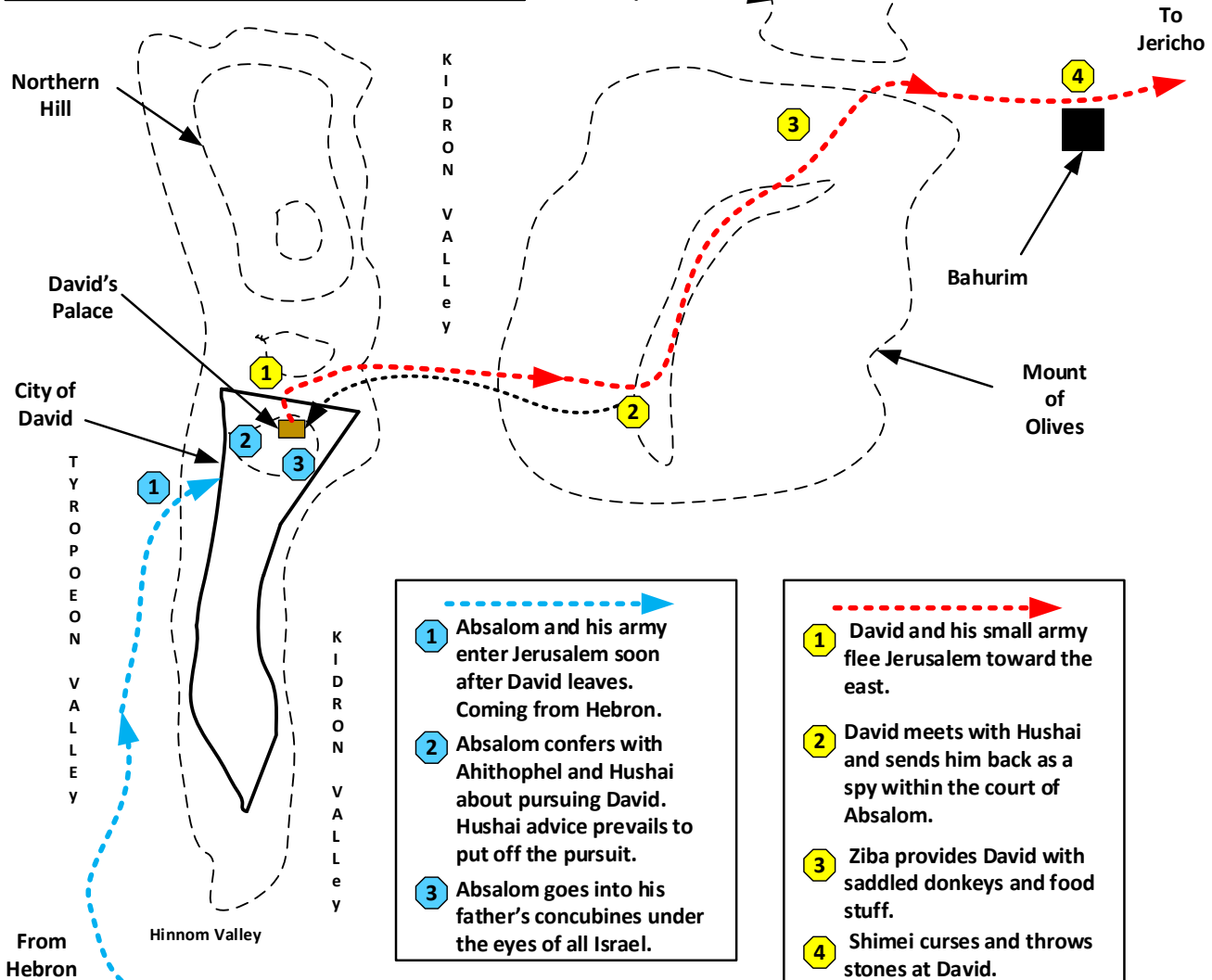
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<sup>b</sup> See "[Israel and Judah: 7. Conspiracy and War](#)" which explains the prior interaction of David, Mephibosheth, and Ziba as presented in 2 Samuel chapter 9. Being crippled, Mephibosheth might be able to be king, but this is nowhere stated in Scripture.

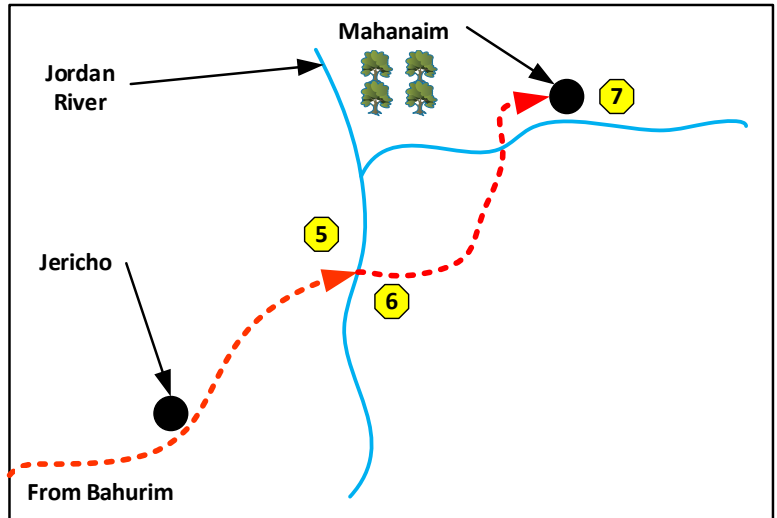
# Flight of David from Absalom

Chart IJ-10a  
Date: 5/25/1015



- ① Absalom and his army enter Jerusalem soon after David leaves. Coming from Hebron.
- ② Absalom confers with Ahithophel and Hushai about pursuing David. Hushai advice prevails to put off the pursuit.
- ③ Absalom goes into his father's concubines under the eyes of all Israel.

- ① David and his small army flee Jerusalem toward the east.
- ② David meets with Hushai and sends him back as a spy within the court of Absalom.
- ③ Ziba provides David with saddled donkeys and food stuff.
- ④ Shimei curses and throws stones at David.
- ⑤ David and his army stop at the Jordan River crossing to rest for the night.
- ⑥ David receives warning sent from Hushai to flee so he and the army cross the Jordan before morning light.
- ⑦ David moves on from the Jordan and arrives at Mahanaim before Absalom in his pursue reaches the river a few days later.



**Verses 1–2.** “**Beyond the summit**” means east of the summit of the Mount of Olives. The Concordant Version translation “lad” is normally translated as “servant.” Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, brought donkeys, food, and drink for David and those with him.<sup>c</sup> He anticipated the arrival of David and his followers. David asks two questions. He is suspicious. The first is, what are all these things for?

**Verses 3–4.** The second question David asks is, “**where is the son of your lord?**” referring to Mephibosheth (King Saul’s grandson and Jonathan’s son). Ziba boldly lies to David about Mephibosheth, although it might be plausible to David that the grandson of his former enemy, Saul, might indeed think as Ziba tells his story. David gives to Ziba and his family all of King Saul’s inherited land and goods, disinheriting Mephibosheth. That decision would apply only if David retained power. But this is not the end of the story of the relations between David, Ziba, and Mephibosheth; it continues in 2 Samuel chapter 19.

**Verses 5–6.** Bahurim is a town east of the Mount of Olives, between Jerusalem and Jericho, the territory of Benjamin. Shimei son of Gera<sup>d</sup> was a supporter of King Saul’s reign. He stands in the middle of the road and throws rocks at David, the troops around their king, and at his followers. In other words, he physically attacks David with rocks.<sup>e</sup> He did not use a sling. Shimei was either a crank or a brave man. David’s composure and patience were remarkable. He was protected by his soldiers on both sides of him (verse 6). This seems to confirm David’s decision about the supporters of Saul and his relatives, such as Mephibosheth. The force of what Shimei did is told by Robert Bergen:

**“There Shimei, a relative of Saul, assaulted David’s group both verbally and physically. The throwing of stones involved symbolically carrying out a Torah-style execution ... Shimei did this in spite of the fact that David could have responded instantly with deadly force to eliminate this threat to his life. Shimei’s charge against David was that he was a ‘man of blood’ — that is, a murderer — and a ‘man of Belial’, that is, a man of base moral character.”<sup>f</sup>**

Some speculate that David did not want to harm Shimei because he was telling some truth, and his speech was part of God’s public punishment, both of his sins, and about those sins being made known. Shimei may have been repulsively (and dangerously) verbalizing the public perception of David’s treatment of Saul and Saul’s family. We receive the viewpoint of the biblical author.

From verse 5 through verse 13, the word “maledict” in its verb and adjectival forms are given another translation [“curse”], in brackets. I doubt many know that the Concordant Version’s use of maledict means curse as the King James Version translates it, which is a perfectly good translation of the Hebrew.

**Verses 7–8.** Shimei’s rants were about David’s actions against the house of Saul, not about David’s specific actions regarding Bathsheba and Uriah. However, when Shimei said, “**Yahweh is giving the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom; and here you are in your evil predicament because you are a man of bloodguilts,**” David must have remembered again the prophet Nathan’s pronouncement of God’s punishment. David applied Shimei’s statement to YHWH’s punishments for his adultery and murder of Uriah. David’s conscience was struck and he thought better of taking retribution against Shimei at that moment. David did not want to harm an unwitting messenger from God.

**Verse 9.** Abashai asks David for permission to kill Shimei, just as he asked permission to kill King Saul in 1 Samuel 26:8. Abashai was correct because Moses forbade the cursing of rulers (Exodus 22:28), and Shimei was committing sedition against King David. Beheading was a form of judicial execution.

**Verses 10–12.** David states Shimei should not be harmed because God is involved in his tirade:

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<sup>c</sup> Ziba was a former servant of King Saul and his family (2 Samuel chapter 9). He may have been the chief servant of his household. After Saul’s death, he was appointed to serve Saul’s sole remaining son Mephibosheth. Ziba and his family were given proceeds of agricultural production from Saul’s estate.

<sup>d</sup> It is unclear whether Gera is Shimei’s father’s name (which is usually the case), or a geographical name of the town where he lived. No other “Gera” is mentioned in the biblical histories, although people often had several names that are not explained.

<sup>e</sup> Rocks can kill. David brought down Goliath with a rock from a sling. Shimei threw his rocks with intent to do bodily harm.

<sup>f</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), p. 408.

- YHWH told Shimei to do this (verses 10 and 11),
- YHWH may take pity on David in his humiliation (verse 12), and
- YHWH may bless David rather than curse him (verse 12).

In other words, David trusts God, whether receiving evil or good from Him. David orders Abashai, brother of Joab and one of his generals, not to harm Shimei. Then David verbally commands those around him to leave Shimei alone, should any of them impulsively want to do so. Absalom is the threat, not the distraction of Shimei.

For his part, Shimei considered David to be a usurper of Saul's rightful throne, and he risked his life to tell David what he thought of the now-deposed king. There is no hint that Shimei supported Absalom, except that Absalom was the means of David receiving God's judgment. Shimei was half-right. Shimei either forgot or did not care that David was God's anointed. Apparently, many in Israel forgot that fact because Absalom's rebellion had some wide popular support. Perhaps David's sex and murder scandal led to their support of David's son as king.

**Verse 13.** Shimei provoked David so much that he followed him and continued to throw stones at his rightful king. We meet with both Ziba and Shimei later in 2 Samuel chapter 19.

**Verse 14.** Finally, David and his group of followers arrive at the Jordan River and drink their fill. There is no army from Absalom following them.

### *David's Retribution*

While David did not harm Shimei during his lifetime, note the last recorded words of David to his Son Solomon, his immediate heir:

**“And behold, with you is Shimei son of Gera the Benjamite from Bahurim. He maledicted [cursed] me with a painful malediction [curse] on the day when I was going to Mahanaim. When he himself came down to meet me at the Jordan, I swore to him by Yahweh, saying, ‘Assuredly not shall I put you to death with the sword.’ But now you must not hold him innocent; for you are a wise man, and you will know what you should do to him and let his grey hairs go down to the unseen in blood. Then David lay down with his fathers; and he was entombed in the city of David.”**

• 1 Kings 2:8–10

Yes, David remembered this incident. Shimei's words of cursing dug deep into his memory. David's last recorded words in Scripture before his death were those of retribution against Shimei.<sup>8</sup> I will say more on David's retribution against Shimei when we get to 1 Kings chapter 2, which is about David's death, and why David did not forgive and forget Shimei public tirade which supported rebellion. David merely postponed judgment against Shimei.

### *Hushai — David's Spy in Absalom's Court*

The story returns to Hushai. David conspired for Hushai to volunteer, go to Absalom, and offer his services as counselor to the new king, having been one of David's counselors (review 2 Samuel 15:32–37). His task was to counter the counsel of Ahithophel, a former wise counselor of David, now working for Absalom. David considered Ahithophel to be a very dangerous man. Solomon writes, **“Designs should be established by counsel; Execute war according to strategies”** (Proverbs 20:18). Ahithophel was a master at strategic counsel.

Solomon wrote later, **“When there are no strategies a people shall fall, Yet in many counselors there is**

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<sup>8</sup> Other words of David were presented in the text of 2 Samuel, but they are formal declarations to the leaders and people of Israel. The text reads that the death sentence upon Shimei was said to Solomon immediately before David's death and presented as his last words.

**safety**” (Proverbs 11:14), and **“For you wage war for yourself according to strategy, And in many counselors there is safety”** (Proverbs 24:6). While this is usually true, in this instance David sent Hushai to advise actions counter to those proposed by Ahithophel, advice against the best interests of Absalom. This is the opposite of Solomon’s “many counselors = safety” statement. With this in mind, the story proceeds.

### ***TEXT: Hushai Goes to Absalom***

#### **2 Samuel 16:15–23**

<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, entered Jerusalem; and Ahithophel was with him. <sup>16</sup> And so it was, just as David’s longtime associate Hushai came to Absalom, that Hushai said to Absalom, **“Long live the king! Long live the king!”** <sup>17</sup> “But Absalom said to Hushai, **“Is this your loyalty to your associate? Why did you not go with your associate?”**

<sup>18</sup> Hushai replied to Absalom, **“I did not because I shall belong to him whom Yahweh and this people and all the men of Israel have chosen, and I shall stay with him.”** <sup>19</sup> And in the second place, whom should I serve? **Is it not before his son? Just as I served before your father, so I shall serve before you.”**

<sup>20</sup> Absalom then said to Ahithophel, **“Grant us your counsel! What should we do?”**

<sup>21</sup> So Ahithophel said to Absalom,

**“Go in to your father’s concubines whom he left to be in charge of the palace. Thus all Israel will hear that you are in bad odor with your father; and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.”**

<sup>22</sup> So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the housetop; and Absalom went in to his father’s concubines under the eyes of all Israel.

<sup>23</sup> In those days, the counsel which Ahithophel gave was regarded just as if one had consulted the oracle of the One, Elohim. In this way all the counsel of Ahithophel was esteemed both by David and Absalom.

[end text]

**Verse 15.** Absalom’s army is entering and securing the capital of Jerusalem in a bloodless coup when Hushai arrives before Absalom. His counselor Ahithophel was with him on this “glorious” day.

**Verses 16–19.** All of Hushai’s speeches here are ambiguous, but they were accepted by Absalom as being statements of support for his being king. Consider them again:

- **“Long live the king! Long live the king!”** (verse 16) — meaning the true king, David.
- **“I shall belong to him whom Yahweh and this people and all the men of Israel have chosen, and I shall stay with him”** (Verse 18) — meaning that David is God’s chosen king.
- **“... whom should I serve? Is it not before his son? Just as I served before your father, so I shall serve before you”** (Verse 19) — meaning that Absalom is at that moment de facto king in Jerusalem, by God’s choice, but this could change. Or, possibly it means simply that Hushai is serving in front of Absalom, as he did his father, even though he is still served David.

Hushai never says Absalom’s name in any of these statements. Knowing as we do that Hushai is actually working on David’s behalf (2 Samuel 15:32–37), these statements apply to Hushai’s loyalty to David, while posing to be loyal to Absalom. Some may consider these not to be actual lies. Most people reading or listening to the statements of Hushai would think them to be remarkably subtle and cunning.

**Verses 20–22.** Absalom shifts focus to address Ahithophel, and asks him in effect, what should I do next? Ahithophel’s advice is for Absalom to go and have sex with (rape) David’s concubines who remained in Jerusalem. He advised doing it as a public display. Ahithophel’s advice was forbidden in the Torah. This was foolishness on the part of Ahithophel, just as David asked God, **“David said, I pray, O Yahweh, make**

**Ahithophel's counsel look unwise!**" (2 Samuel 15:31). On the other hand, this was one of the punishments Nathan predicted God would inflict upon David:

**"Behold, I [YHWH] am raising up over you evil from your own house; I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your associate; and he will lie down with your wives before the eyes of this sun."**

• 2 Samuel 12:11

From Ahithophel and Absalom's point of view, this was a display of power. David was so weak that he was unable to protect his concubines from Absalom's authority and prowess. With such weakness, how could David protect and rule the people of Israel? Absalom did as advised, and he did it in public. Such an action by Absalom would make him irreconcilable with David. This is what is meant (verse 21), **"all Israel will hear that you are in bad odor with your father."**

**Verse 22.** This **"housetop"** was not David's palace because that was on the highest point of the City of David. Recall this verse when David first saw Bathsheba:

**"It was at eventide, and David arose from his bed. When he walked about on the housetop of the royal palace, he saw from the housetop a woman bathing."**

• 2 Samuel 11:2

David must have been looking down to view Bathsheba bathing. Likewise, the perspective of the people of the city of Jerusalem to look into the tent where Absalom was having sex with David's concubines, that tent must have been down from the crest of the hill, below David's palace.

**Verse 23.** What does this verse mean? It means that the reputation of Ahithophel's advice was so excellent and so often that it seemed that he had a direct connection with God. But this time he supported the wrong man for the king. As I mentioned before, we are not told why Ahithophel supported Absalom.

### ***TEXT: Absalom and His Two Rival Advisors***

#### **2 Samuel 17:1–14**

<sup>1</sup> Ahithophel said to Absalom,

**"Oh let me choose for myself 12,000 men; let me set out and let me pursue after David tonight. I shall come upon him while he is weary and slack of hands; I will make him tremble; and when all the soldiers with him flee, I will smite the king, him alone." Let me bring back all the soldiers to you, like the return of a bride to her husband. It is but the soul of one man you are seeking; as for all the people, they shall come to be at peace."**

<sup>4</sup> The word seemed upright in the eyes of Absalom and in the eyes of all the elders of Israel.

<sup>5</sup> Then Absalom said, **"Now call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he too has in his mouth to say."** <sup>6</sup> Hushai came to Absalom, and Absalom spoke to him saying, **"This is the plan Ahithophel has advised. Should we act on his advice? If it be no, speak up for yourself."**

<sup>7</sup> Hushai replied to Absalom, **"This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good."** <sup>8</sup> Hushai continued,

**"You yourself know your father and his men that they are masters of war [mighty men], and they are bitter of soul like a bear in the open field bereaved of her cubs. Your father is a man of war, and he will not lodge for the night with the soldiers." Even now he must be hiding in one of the dark holes or in some other place.**

**And if some of them would fall [Absalom's soldiers would be killed] at the start, and one hears about it, then the hearer will say, 'A stroke has come over the soldiers who follow after Absalom.'** <sup>10</sup> Even if he is a son of valor whose heart is like the heart of a lion, it shall melt, yea melt away; for all Israel knows that your father is a master of war [mighty man], and those with him are sons of valor.

<sup>11</sup> Hence I counsel: Let all Israel from Dan to Beersheba convene **in a gathering about you, as numerous as the sand by the sea; and your presence be marching in their midst in the attack.**

<sup>12</sup> When we come upon him in one of the places where he may be found, we will descend on him just as the night mist falls on the ground; **no one will be left alive, neither he nor all the men with him, not even one.** <sup>13</sup> If he should proceed into a city, all Israel will take up lines of rope to that city; and we will pull it in pieces into the wadi, until not even a pebble will be found there.”

<sup>14</sup> Absalom and all the men of Israel agreed that the counsel of Hushai the Archite was better than the counsel of Ahithophel, for Yahweh Himself had determined to annul Ahithophel’s good counsel in order that Yahweh might bring evil upon Absalom. [end text]

**Verses 1–2.** Ahithophel’s counsel was to move 12,000 men quickly, all aimed for one purpose, to kill just one man, King David himself. At that moment there must be an overwhelming number of troops compared to David’s skeleton armed force (2 Samuel 15:18). When David’s troops flee, David will panic and I, Ahithophel, will kill him. Ahithophel himself would lead the attack, not King Absalom. Furthermore, Ahithophel wanted to move “tonight” meaning immediately and not give David’s men any time to rest. Confront David’s small army quickly when they least expect it or are unprepared for battle.

Rather than create a martyr, David’s supporters would disassemble, split into pieces, each striving for control. Those pieces could be destroyed or brought under Absalom’s sovereignty. Without David the king, a soldier of proven ability, and an extremely dangerous opponent,<sup>h</sup> there was no one who could take his place, and no successor could arise quickly to take allegiance of the people of Israel from Absalom. Ahithophel’s advice was, cut off the head of the snake, and the rest will be harmless, wither, and die.<sup>i</sup>

**Verses 3–4.** By this strategy, Ahithophel thought he could quickly unify Israel under Absalom. When he says he would be able to **“bring back all the soldiers to you, like the return of a bride to her husband,”** he does not mean Absalom’s soldiers, but that all of David’s soldiers could be brought to allegiance to Absalom as their king. Then Ahithophel indicates that the people with David are not enemies, but only one man, David, is the enemy. Only when David is dead, will **“all the people, they shall come to be at peace.”** At that moment everyone agreed with Ahithophel (verse 4).

**Verses 5–7.** Absalom calls Hushai forward, assuming agreement. Hushai immediately says Ahithophel is wrong.

**Verses 8–9.** There is no way Ahithophel will trap David and kill him, he says. He justifiably praises David. (Remember, David survived King Saul’s attempts to trap him, and many of his troops are professional soldiers.) David as **“a master of war”** will not be caught as Ahithophel proposes.

**Verses 9–10.** Any defeat at this early stage of conflict, Hushai says, would reflect upon Absalom’s entire rebellion. He acknowledges, **“Even if he [a soldier in Absalom’s army] is a son of valor ...,”** then Hushai says directly what everyone knows, **“those with him are sons of valor.”** Absalom’s soldiers might be sons of valor, but we know David’s troops are sons of valor. David’s troops are dangerous men, too dangerous to attack unprepared.

**Verses 11–12.** Hushai gives his counsel. Gather an overwhelming force, with Absalom present (compare with verse 1) attacking David when fully prepared. Once prepared, then attack David wherever he may be found, destroy him, killing all his supporters — every one of them.

**Verse 13.** If David holes up in a city, Absalom’s army must be committed to destroying that city, no matter how long it takes. Hooks attached to ropes thrown over the top of the walls and pulling them down was one technique to attack and break through city walls during a siege. Hushai suggests pulling the pieces

<sup>h</sup> Remember, David had a reputation for luck, but we know he was not lucky, but blessed from God. As far as Scripture indicates, David never lost a battle.

<sup>i</sup> Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, pp. 411–412.



into a nearby valley, leveling the city.<sup>j</sup>

**Verse 14.** Hushai convinced his audience, probably because his advice was deemed safer. The truth was that God intervened so that Ahithophel's counsel would be rejected and Absalom would ultimately fail. Robert Bergen comments on Hushai's advice:

**“The speech is masterful in its construction and powerful in its effect: it simultaneously discredits Ahithophel, undermines Absalom's confidence, magnifies the king's worst fears, and buys David precious time to escape and regroup. In the end it lays the foundation for David's return to Jerusalem.”**

• *Robert Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, 412*

Note that Absalom first supported Ahithophel's plan, then switched support to Hushai's plan:

- **Verse 4.** **“The word seemed upright in the eyes of Absalom and in the eyes of all the elders of Israel.”**
- **Verse 14.** **“Absalom and all the men of Israel agreed that the counsel of Hushai the Archite was better than the counsel of Ahithophel, ...”** Why?

**Verse 14.** (continued) **“for Yahweh Himself had determined to annul Ahithophel's good counsel in order that Yahweh might bring evil upon Absalom.”** Divine intervention was the true reason for Absalom's change of mind. Hushai's mission was successful. He thwarted Ahithophel's advice

Next, Hushai must communicate Absalom's intentions to King David. Great intrigue is involved.

### *TEXT: David Is Warned, and Escapes*

#### 2 Samuel 17:15–23

<sup>15</sup> Then Hushai told the priests Zadok and Abiathar,

**“This and that did Ahithophel counsel Absalom and the elders of Israel; yet I have counseled this and that.”<sup>16</sup> Now send quickly and tell David, saying, ‘You must not lodge tonight in the gorges of the wilderness; you should rather cross over, yea cross over lest the king be swallowed up with all the soldiers who are with him.’”**

<sup>17</sup> Now Jonathan and Ahimaaz were staying at En-rogel, and a maidservant would go and tell them; then they would go and tell king David, for they dared not be seen entering the city.

<sup>18</sup> But a lad saw them and told Absalom. So both of them left quickly and came to the house of a man in Bahurim who had a well in his court. They got down into it,<sup>19</sup> and the wife took a portiere [a cloth covering], spread it over the mouth of the well and spread out grist on it, so that nothing would be known about it.

<sup>20</sup> When Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house and asked where Ahimaaz and Jonathan were, the woman told them that they had crossed over the shallow waters. Though the servants sought them, they found no one; and so they returned to Jerusalem.

<sup>21</sup> It was after they had gone that Ahimaaz and Jonathan came up from the well and went and told king David. They said to David, **“Arise and cross the water quickly, for in this way had Ahithophel counseled against you.”**<sup>22</sup> Then David and all the soldiers with him arose and crossed the Jordan; by the morning light not even one was missing who had not crossed the Jordan.

<sup>23</sup> When Ahithophel saw that his counsel had not been followed, he saddled his donkey and set out and went to his home in his own city. Then he gave instructions to his household and strangled himself and died. He was entombed in his father's tomb. [end text]

<sup>j</sup> The stones of the Jerusalem Temple, itself a fortress, were thrown into the Kidron Valley. Those stones were reused elsewhere in Jerusalem. The church historian Eusebius in his book, *Proof of the Gospel* (Book VIII, chapter 3, ¶405) describes the quarry-like situation and the loose stones available for construction in Jerusalem as late as 314–318 AD.

**Verse 15.** Hushai needs to convey his “military intelligence” to David immediately. The text does not repeat what happened, it merely states that Hushai told the priests what happened.

**Verse 16.** Hushai advises David to cross the Jordan River quickly to prevent being trapped, and operate from there. Though Hushai’s advice was followed, there was still danger to David’s contingent of followers and the army.

**Verse 17.** Zadok’s son Ahimaaz and Abiathar’s son Jonathan (2 Samuel 15:36) were waiting at En-Rogel to receive the message from their fathers (via a servant girl), and carry it to David. En-Rogel is a short distance south of Jerusalem at the border of Benjamin and Judah, at the southern part of the Kidron Valley where it meets with the Valley of Hinnom. The plan was almost upset.

**Verse 18.** The two were spotted, reported on to Absalom, but they hid to avoid capture before traveling to where David was. Bahurim is a town east of Jerusalem. They obviously knew the man who owned the house, who was likely wealthy. He not only had a house with a courtyard, but it had its own well.

**Verses 18–21.** In verse 9 above, Hushai said about David, **“Even now he must be hiding in one of the dark holes or in some other place.”** In this case, even though the Hebrew for “dark hole” and “well” are different, the connection is clear, David’s messengers or agents are indeed hiding in a dark hole of a well, which protects them until danger is past. In two instances, a girl (verse 17) and a woman (verse 19) save the messengers.

**Verse 22.** Taking no chances, David and all his people crossed the Jordan River that very night, even though they were all exhausted. All made it across safely. They were now safe whether Absalom followed Ahithophel’s advice or waited to follow Hushai’s advice.

**Verse 23.** Ahithophel **“strangled himself.”** Why did he take rejection so seriously? Perhaps he felt his advice was the only opportunity for Absalom’s victory. David would recover from his desperate situation and prevail in his dynastic struggle. The most frequent translation is that Ahithophel “hanged himself.” He then set his affairs in order, meaning that he distributed his wealth and land among his heirs, hoping that David, when victorious, would not take vengeance upon them by seizing his property.

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### *TEXT: David and Absalom’s Maneuvers*

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#### **2 Samuel 17:24–29**

<sup>24</sup> As for David, he had already reached Mahanaim, when Absalom crossed over the Jordan, he and all the men of Israel with him.

<sup>25</sup> It was Amasa whom Absalom had set over his military host instead of Joab. Amasa was the son of a man whose name was Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had gone in to Abigail [Abigail], daughter of Nahash and sister of Zeruiah, Joab’s mother. <sup>26</sup> The Israelites and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.

<sup>27</sup> Now it happened when David had reached Mahanaim that Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the sons of Ammon, and Machir son of Ammiel from Lo-debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, <sup>28</sup> brought bedding, basins and potter’s vessels, also wheat, barley, meal flour, toasted grain, beans, lentils, <sup>29</sup> honey, clotted cream of the flock, and curded cheese of the herd. They brought them close to David and to the soldiers with him to eat. For they thought that the soldiers would have become hungry, faint and thirsty in the wilderness. [end text]

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**Verse 24.** For this one verse, the focus changes back to David. Mahanaim is a town about 28 miles north of Jericho, but east of the Jordan River. It means “camps,” plural, or better “two camps,” and was named by the patriarch Jacob as the location where he camped and met with angels.<sup>k</sup>

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<sup>k</sup> This occurred just before Jacob traveled to meet and reconcile with his twin brother Esau. Jacob split his families, people, and flocks into two camps, so one might survive if Esau destroyed the other. Hence the name “camps” or “two camps.”

**“As for Jacob, he too went his way; and messengers of Elohim came upon him. And Jacob said as he saw them: ‘This is the camp of Elohim.’ So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.”**

• **Genesis 32:1–2**

Besides the supernatural occurrence, Mahanaim was the fortified city where Ishbosheth, the son of Saul had his capital when he opposed David (2 Samuel chapter 2).

**Verse 25.** This is a complicated and controversial verse for several reasons, the result varying with different translations. First, there is a strange statement about Amasa leading Absalom’s army **“instead of Joab.”** Joab was Amasa’s cousin. This statement may be saying that Amasa could not be compared to Joab as a commander.

Who was Amasa? As the son of David’s sister Abigail, he was also David’s nephew. Abigail’s husband, Ithra the Ishmaelite, was probably a proselyte.<sup>1</sup> He was alternately named Jether the Ishmaelite in the Book of Chronicles’ listing of David’s lineage through his father Jesse:

**“Ozem his sixth, David his seventh, and their sisters Zeruiah and Abigail. Zeruiah's three sons: Abishai, Joab and Asahel. Abigail bore Amasa; Amasa's father was Jether the Ishmaelite.”**

• **1 Chronicles 2:15–17**

In 2 Samuel 17:25 he is called Ithra, while in 1 Chronicles 2:17 he is named Jether. Both names mean “surplus,” “abundance” or “excellence.”

**Verse 26.** Gilead is the land east of the Jordan River, with highlands and desert to the east. This location was north of Mahanaim, where Ishbosheth had his capital in exile (2 Samuel chapter 2) in his dynastic war with King David. After Ishbosheth died, the town gave its allegiance to David (2 Samuel 5:1).

**Verse 27–29.** The scene shifts again back to David. At Mahanaim, David’s forces are well supplied by three leaders. In fact, a former enemy, the Ammonites from the city of Rabbah, and two other friends of David seem to have brought the supplies. They may have also brought troops with them, as vassals are supposed to do. This land outside of Mahanaim is called a **“wilderness.”** All three of these supporters of David risk the deadly wrath of Absalom if he is victorious.

What is not stated in these verses above or those below is how much time transpired from Hushai’s advice and Absalom’s arrival with his army at Mahanaim. It may have been days, weeks, or even months. However long it was, David seems to have increased the number of troops from the time his band of supporters left Jerusalem. They were ready when Absalom’s army arrived. The battle is ready to be fought.

### ***TEXT: David’s Day of Battle against Absalom***

#### **2 Samuel 18:1–18**

<sup>1</sup> David mustered the soldiers who were with him and set over them chief officers of contingents and chief officers of hundreds. <sup>2</sup> Then David sent out the soldiers, a third under the hand of Joab, a third under the hand of Joab’s brother Abishai son of Zeruiah, and a third under the hand of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the soldiers, **“I myself shall also march forth, yea march forth with you.”** <sup>3</sup> But the soldiers protested,

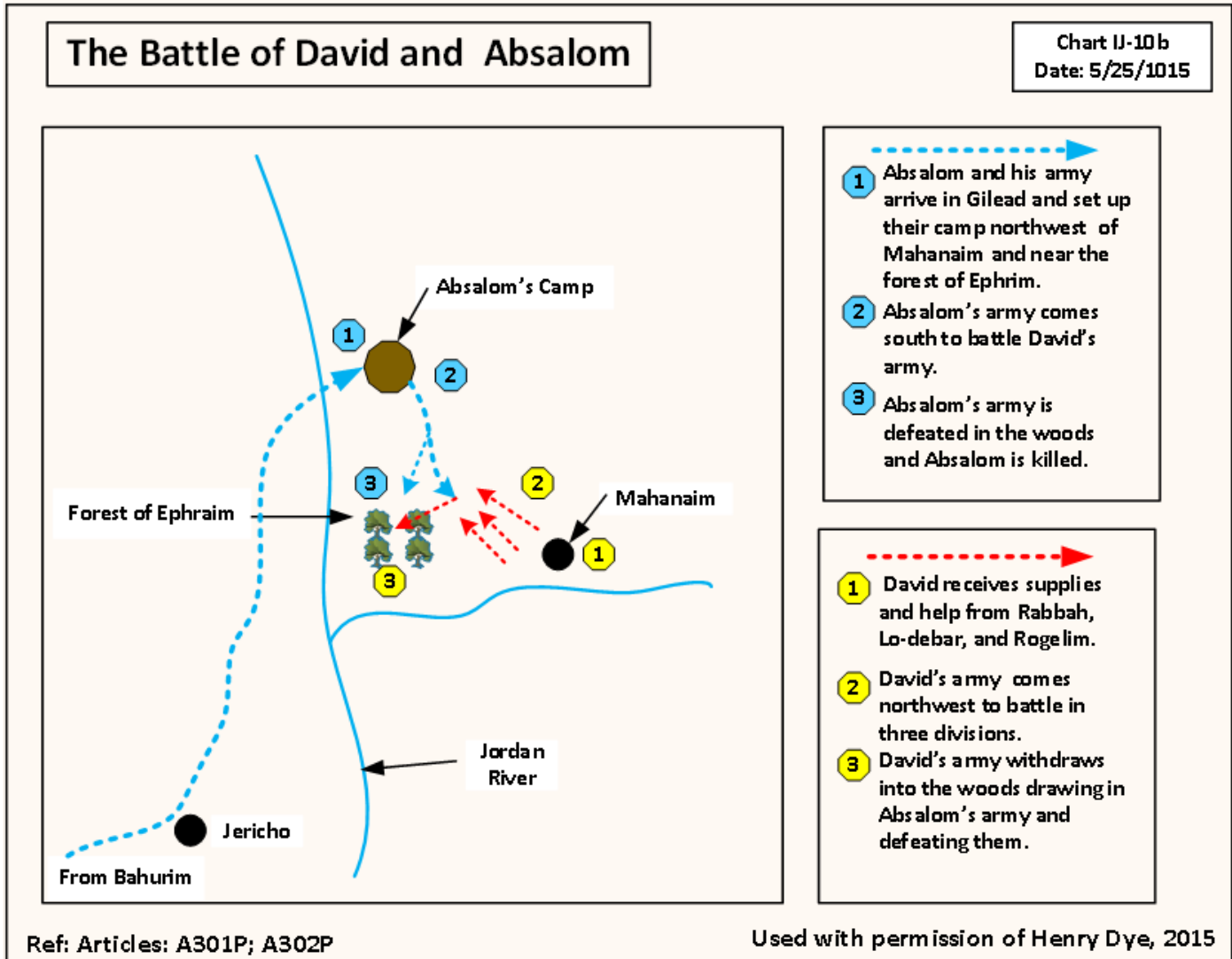
**“You should not march forth! For if we should retreat, yea retreat, the heart of the others would not be stirred about us; even if half of us should die, the heart of the others would not be stirred about us. For you are worth ten thousands of such as we. Therefore it is better that you should be ready to send help to us from the city.”**

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<sup>1</sup> There is a textual problem in 2 Samuel 17:25. There, “Ithra” is called an Israelite in Hebrew. In 1 Chronicles 2:17 “Jether” is called an Ishmaelite, yet Ithra and Jether are the same person, with a one letter difference in the spelling Hebrew. Ishmaelite is the correct rendering. To mention that someone was an “Israelite” in the Chronicles genealogy would be superfluous, but a clarification that he was an Ishmaelite would be expected within a genealogical list of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> Then the king said to them, **“I shall do what seems best in your eyes.”** So the king stood at the side of the gate as all the soldiers marched forth by hundreds and by thousands.

<sup>5</sup> The king enjoined [ordered] on Joab and on Abishai and on Ittai, saying, **“Deal gently with the young man Absalom, for my sake! Thus all the soldiers heard when the king instructed all the chief officers on behalf of Absalom.”**



<sup>6</sup> The soldiers marched forth into the field to meet Israel, and **the battle was fought in the wildwood of Ephraim.** <sup>7</sup> There the soldiers of Israel were stricken before the conscript servants of David; and there the stroke was great that day — twenty contingents. <sup>8</sup> From there the fighting was scattered over the surface of the whole area, and the wildwood devoured many more of the soldiers than the sword devoured on that day.

<sup>9</sup> Then Absalom encountered the presence of the conscript servants of David. Now Absalom was riding on a mule; and as the mule came to pass under the meshes of a great terebinth, his head caught fast in the terebinth. **He was hanging between the heavens and the earth,** while the mule under him passed on.

<sup>10</sup> One of the men saw it and told Joab, saying, **“Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in a terebinth.”** <sup>11</sup> Joab replied to the man who told him, **“Since you saw him, for what reason did you not smite him there to the earth? I would have been obliged to give you fifty pieces of silver and one girdle.”**

<sup>12</sup> But the man answered Joab,

**“Even if I were weighing a thousand pieces of silver on my palm, I would not stretch forth my hand against the king’s son. For in our ears the king enjoined on you and on Abishai and on Ittai, saying, ‘For my sake keep watch over the young man Absalom!’<sup>13</sup> Otherwise I would have dealt falsely against my own soul; for no matter at all is suppressed from the king. Yet you yourself would stand by aloof.**

<sup>14</sup> Joab replied, **“Let me not thus wait before you.”** So he took three javelins in his palm and plunged them into Absalom’s heart. While he was still alive in the heart of the terebinth,<sup>15</sup> ten of Joab’s youthful gear bearers surrounded Absalom and smote him and put him to death.

<sup>16</sup> Then Joab blew the trumpet [a *shofar*], and his soldiers returned from pursuing after Israel; for Joab kept the soldiers back.<sup>17</sup> Then they took Absalom and flung him into a large dark hole in the wildwood, and they set up over him a very large mound of stones. As for all Israel, they fled, each man to his tent.

<sup>18</sup> During his lifetime Absalom had taken the monument which is in the vale of the king and set it up for himself; for he said, I have no son in order to keep my name in remembrance. So he called the monument after his own name, and it is called Absalom’s signpost to this day. [end text]

**Verses 1–2.** The troops gather and organize their battle formations. Absalom’s army came south from Gilead. David’s army went a short way north of Mahanaim. David’s order of battle divides his forces into three divisions each under a different commander. Joab likely commanded the center, Abashai on the right, and Ittai the Gittite on the left. Ittai is a foreign-born commander and not an Israelite, and he leads foreign troops. David judges him and his troops to be as loyal and competent as are his top commanders and native troops. This indicates a great deal of trust.

Each major division and subdivisions of thousands and hundreds was led or trained by one or more of David’s “mighty men.”<sup>m</sup> These were professional soldiers who were able to efficiently train others to march, fight — and kill. Further divisions into thousands and hundreds are made. Josephus says David’s army numbers 4,000 soldiers (*Antiquities of the Jews* 7.233). If each division has 2,000 troops, more or less, this means David’s army was between 4,000 and 7,000 men. Absalom’s army was much larger. There may have been more who joined David’s army along the way to Mahanaim.

The complexity and confusion of ancient battles was so great that sub-commanders under the king were somewhat autonomous in their actions. David as King is supreme commander. David announces that he will lead his troops from the front.

**Verses 3–4.** The army rebels at the thought of David endangering himself. They insist he views the battle from the city walls (or tower) of Mahanaim. David agrees to their demand and salutes them at the city gate as they pass through. His own troops actually agreed with Ahithophel that David was the “key man” who could not be risked in combat where anything could happen.<sup>n</sup> David is available to help or inspire them if needed. It is even possible they did not want David to fight directly against his own son.

**Verse 5.** David gives specific instructions to his three commanders, heard by all the troops that Absalom was to be spared and captured rather than killed.

**Verses 6–7.** Two verses tell us what happened, without many details.<sup>o</sup> The armies marched to meet; **“the battle was fought in the wildwood ...”**; the soldiers of Israel **“were stricken”** [defeated]; and many from the Israelite army died, thousands of them. Interestingly most commentators seem to miss the fact that the battle itself was fought in the woods.

<sup>m</sup> They are previously mentioned in 2 Samuel 16:6 and 17:8. We learn more about David’s mighty men in 2 Samuel 21:15–22 and 1 Chronicles 20:4–8.

<sup>n</sup> Kings were sometimes killed in battle, especially when they led their troops. Ahab of Israel (1 Kings chapter 22) and King Josiah of Judah (2 Chronicles chapter 35) are two such examples. In this instance the usurper, Absalom, was killed in the battle.

<sup>o</sup> Josephus says that David’s small army attacked first Absalom’s army. I think they then retreated into the woods.

This likely means that David’s army withdrew into the dense woods to fight for these reasons:

1. In woods, the numerical advantage of Absalom’s army is not easily exploited.
2. Command and control of troops is much more difficult for the larger army. David’s smaller unit sizes make control of his troops easier in the woods.
3. Dense woods greatly decrease the effects of missiles such as arrows, sling stones, darts, and javelins.
4. Unit cohesion is easily lost unless troops are commanded properly.
5. Not seeing their king or other troops can shake morale, especially when they hear slaughter going on around them.
6. Dense woods gives an advantage to experienced fighters who use trees for defense and cover and to conceal their movements.

The bloody combat continues until Absalom’s troops begin to fear for their lives, then their morale suddenly collapses. That was when they rout, and the worst slaughter begins as David’s troops chase Absalom’s army through the woods. **“Twenty contingents,”** may mean 20,000 men. The word translated “contingents” in the Concordant Version is *aleph* in Hebrew. It can mean “thousands,” “company,” “groups” or “troops.”<sup>p</sup>

**Verse 8.** It is unclear exactly what is meant by **“the wildwood devoured many more of the soldiers than the sword devoured on that day,”** except to say that crowd panic is horrific. People will climb over their comrades to escape what they feel is eminent and certain death. They will even kill each other to escape.<sup>q</sup> When in such a state of panic, each man has a deadly weapon and thinks he can cut or hack himself to safety, even through friendly troops, killing them when necessary to escape.

The woods and land were likely uneven and treacherous so that the panicked, retreating troops injured themselves and David’s pursuing soldiers could easily kill them from behind. The control and leadership of Joab, his brother Abishai, and Ittai certainly played an important part, along with David’s other “mighty men,” each of whom were sub commanders, fierce leaders, and trained killers fighting in close combat. All the “mighty men” present apparently survived, because not one was reported killed in this battle.

**Verses 9–10.** In my opinion, the Concordant Version does not describe what Absalom intended to do. He was not fleeing from David’s troops; I think he was trying to rally his soldiers on a mule, to inspire them to fight harder. Commentaries admit the Hebrew is somewhat obscure, but read what the Greek LXX says that Absalom was doing, he was moving toward David’s soldiers:

**“And Abessalom [Absalom] went to meet the servants of David; and Abessalom was mounted on his mule, and the mule came under the thick boughs of a great oak; and his head was entangled in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth; and the mule passed on from under him.”**

• 2 Samuel 18:9, LXX

His great mass of hair (2 Samuel 14:25–26) was caught in low tree branches and he could not cut himself down. He was helpless. One soldier told Joab about this strange situation. The phrase, **“He was hanging between the heavens and the earth”** is likely a figure of speech meaning that Absalom was essentially “between life and death.” He was soon killed.

**Verse 11–13.** Joab’s mention of an obligation of reward seems to indicate that this was an established practice to recognize a soldier who killed a leader of an enemy army.<sup>f</sup> The soldier pointedly refused to kill

<sup>p</sup> This is another instance of “the problem of large numbers” in the Old Testament, a problem that still needs to be solved.

<sup>q</sup> Similar occurrences of men on the same side killing each other happened before (Judges 7:22; 1 Samuel 14:20) and were to happen later (2 Chronicles 20:22–4).

<sup>f</sup> Boyd Seevers, *Warfare in the Old Testament: the Organization, Weapons, and Tactics of Ancient Near Eastern Armies* (Grand

Absalom and claim Joab's offered reward because of David's explicit orders not to harm his rebellious son (verse 5, "**all the soldiers heard ...**"). The soldier was wise to do as he did, given David's history of killing those who hoped for reward for the deaths of King Saul and King Ishbosheth. It would not have gone well for an ordinary soldier to kill David's beloved but errant son.

**Verses 14–15.** Joab does not hesitate, but takes immediate action, disobeying David's specific order (verses 5 and 12). He strikes at Absalom three times, and the text says he was dead. Then Joab gets ten other soldiers and has them stab Absalom, again "**to death.**" This says to me that each man struck Absalom with a blow that would have killed him. No words were exchanged between Joab and Absalom as far as we know. This became a group act, so David would be less likely to take retribution, either against Joab in particular or ordinary troops, for killing his beloved son Absalom.

**Verse 16.** With Absalom's death, David's victory is complete. Joab trumpeted the recall signal to the troops. Absalom was dead, the battle was over, the pursuit and the killing needed to stop.<sup>s</sup> After all, with the rebellion ended, Absalom's soldiers were now David's subjects again. Interestingly, once Absalom was dead, the battle and the rebellion ended. This was the outcome Absalom hoped for, that David's death would end the struggle for power and kingship. The opposite happened; David prevailed with God's help.

**Verse 17.** Absalom's body was dumped in "**a large dark hole**" and covered with rocks. The remainder of Absalom's troops were allowed to escape "**each man to his tent,**" a figure of speech meaning they went home.

**Verse 18.** This postscript to the saga of Absalom says that Absalom's monument was still standing when Second Samuel was written, "**it is called Absalom's signpost to this day.**" There is evidence that the prophet Isaiah was probably the author of the histories of the kingdoms of Israel, meaning our present books of First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings.<sup>t</sup>

### **Conclusion and Observations**

Absalom's rebellion was crushed. Now comes the aftermath of victory. David's response to Absalom's death will be considered next time. Several observations must be noted about the Absalom and David saga.

1. Hushai said David would likely be hiding in a hole for safety (2 Samuel 17:9) if Ahithophel's plan was followed.
  2. David's messengers hid in a hole for safety to help David (2 Samuel 17:18–21).
  3. At the end, Absalom's body was thrown in a hole in death (2 Samuel 18:17). Such are the plot points that any audience would notice as they heard the story read to them.
1. Jacob met with "messengers" (supernatural angels) at Mahanaim (Genesis 32:1) before he met with his enemy, his brother Esau.
  2. David received his human "messengers" at the same location (2 Samuel 17:24, 27) before he met with his enemy, his son Absalom. Absalom's name means "Ab-Shalom" or "Father-peace." Yet David had no peace because of his own sons.

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Rapids, MI: Kregal Academic, 2013), p. 75.

<sup>s</sup> I heard one military leader state that one important goal of training troops was to teach them when and how to stop killing.

<sup>t</sup> See "[Chapter 12. The Old Testament Periods of Canonization](#)" from Dr. Ernest L. Martin's *Restoring the Original Bible: the Design and Development of the Holy Scriptures*.

1. The town of Bahurim factors large in the narratives of David. It was at Bahurim that Michal, King Saul's daughter and David's first wife, was taken from her husband and given to David.
  2. Shimei, a supporter of Saul's right to the throne, threw stones at David when his entourage passed through the town.
  3. This same town was where Jonathan and Ahimaaz hid from Absalom's people who somehow knew they were working for David.
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1. Joab was wary of participating in the murder of Uriah the Hittite when ordered to do so. He sought to minimize his participation in the plot.
  2. Joab protected Absalom after Amnon's murder, and plotted with Absalom for reconciliation with David.
  3. At the end of Absalom's rebellion, Joab disobeyed David's direct order and personally, along with 10 rank and file soldiers, killed Absalom on the battlefield.
- 
1. David did not want to fight at Jerusalem. In fact, he fled Jerusalem and fought Absalom's forces east of the Jordan River. His goal was to minimize the effects of this civil war.
  2. David knew he would survive because of God's promise that He would continue to be with David.
- 
1. David's adultery with Bathsheba was punished by the rape of his daughter Tamar and the rape of his concubines at Jerusalem.
  2. David's murder of Uriah was punished by the murder of Amnon by Absalom, and Absalom's murder by Joab, David's cousin and general of the host of Israel.

Truly, David understood that his life was a stage with major and minor characters, and that everything he and others did was observed and judged by God. Reread my April 1, 2014 Commentary, "[It's a Mystery](#)." I discuss this fact in that article. Shakespeare reflects this understanding in his play *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7, lines 139–142:

**"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits, and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts."**

Your life will be reviewed and you, like David, will come to understand that God is in control, prayer changes things, and that salvation, both physical and spiritual, can only come from God through Christ.

David Sielaff, June 2015