ABSALOM’S REVOLT

Absalom, we remember, killed his brother Amnon to avenge his sister Tamar, then fled abroad as his father mourned for Amnon. After three years his father allowed him to return to Jerusalem but keep away from him; two years later his father agreed to see him, and they were reconciled.

Absalom was not only rich, he was conceited and ambitious. It was some time after this that he began to equip himself with horses and a chariot, and fifty men who ran in front of him. He would get up early, position himself on the way to the king’s residence, and intercept anyone on his way to the king to seek justice in some dispute or other. He would hear his complaint, assure him that his case was just, but that he could not get justice from the king. If he (Absalom) was appointed king he would see that everyone would get justice everywhere. He also did not like people to bow down to him; if anyone tried he would reach out and pick him up.

In this way he endeared himself to the people and acquired a very large following.

One day he told the king that he wanted to go to Hebron to offer sacrifices in fulfilment of a vow. David gave permission and he went, together with two hundred men from Jerusalem who knew nothing of what was behind it. In the meantime he had sent agents secretly throughout the country telling them that when they heard the sound of the shofar (horn) they should announce ‘Absalom has been made king in Hebron!’ He also sent a message to Ahithophel, David’s chief adviser who supported him (we will hear more about him), and most of the people supported the revolt.
When David was told about it, and that Absalom had great public support, his reaction was quick. ‘Let us get out of this quick, before he comes and wipes us all out’, so he escaped on foot, accompanied by his servants and all the mercenaries who remained loyal to him, with six hundred man from Gath. He left ten *pilagshim* (wives of lower status) to guard the place.

Among those who accompanied David was Ittai the Gathite, and David suggested that he should go home and take his men and their families with him, as he was a foreigner who need not get mixed up in all this. ‘Yesterday you arrived and today I am taking you out to an exile.’ But Ittai insisted on staying.

Zadok and Abiathar the High Priests also joined him with the Ark, and David told them to return with the Ark to Jerusalem, and their two sons could secretly carry messages backwards and forwards so that David would be kept in touch with the situation.

David was only worried about Absalom taking advice from Ahithophel, and prayed to God to frustrate such advice. Then he met his friend Hushai coming to join him, and he had a sudden idea. He told Hushai that he did not need him with him, but he could do him a greater service by returning to Jerusalem. First he should assure Absalom that he was now his servant as he had been previously to David, so that Absalom should trust him. Then he should try to find a way of frustrating the advice of Ahithophel.

Absalom returned with his entourage to Jerusalem, met Hushai, and asked him why he had deserted his friend. Hushai gave a good excuse in reply and said ‘As I served your father, so I will now serve you.’

Absalom then asked Ahithophel for his advice. Ahithophel’s advice was always respected almost as advice from God. He told Absalom to take his father’s wives who had been left behind to guard the house, showing everyone that he now stank in his father’s eyes, and that would strengthen his position. They put a tent up on the roof and
Absalom did this, in front of the population. ¹

‘What next?’ Absalom asked Ahithophel.

‘I will take twelve thousand men with me, we will chase after David and his men, catch them when they are all tired and weak from running, and terrify them. Then I will kill the king alone and bring the rest back to you.’

Absalom and his servants thought this an excellent idea, and asked Hushai what he thought of it.

‘It is bad advice’, said Hushai. ‘You know how your father and his men are all great warriors, at the moment they are hiding somewhere and they will fight bitterly. Far better to gather all the men of Israel from Dan to Beersheba with you yourself personally at the head, we will pounce on them and we will not leave one alive.’

Absalom and the people all agreed that Hushai’s advice was far better than that of Ahithophel. In fact Hushai’s advice was, deliberately, far worse than Ahithophel’s, but it sounded better. God had decided that Ahithophel’s advice should be ignored, and Hushai had played on Absalom’s conceit. When Ahithophel heard that his advice was rejected he went home and committed suicide.

With various incidents on the way, David and his entourage ran towards the Jordan. He received news of Absalom’s intentions and they all crossed the Jordan overnight, then moved north to Mahanaim,

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¹. Whenever there was a struggle among men for leadership of a group or society, one being already there, it was customary for the winner to take the leader’s wives. (This even happens among gorillas, who practice polygamy.) Likewise, a usurper who took the throne established his position by taking the wives of his predecessor. (We have met this before.) David took Saul’s wives, after the death of Saul and presumably also of his son Ish-bosheth, legitimately.

Absalom committed three serious sins: adultery, incest and rebellion.

But we notice that this, as forecast by Nathan, was part of David’s punishment for taking Bathsheba.
where Barzillai and various other people welcomed them and gave them all lots of good food, water and rest facilities.

David then organised his men into an army with three divisions, putting Joab, his brother Abishai, and Ittai the Gathite, over one each. They went out to fight; he wanted to join them himself but the people would not let him, and made him stay behind. Before they went he commanded the three generals for everyone to hear: ‘Go easy with Absalom himself.’

Meanwhile Absalom appointed his cousin Amasa as his general.

The two armies met, the battle was in a forest and bitter, and David’s men routed the others, who fled. Absalom was riding on a mule and his head got caught over the branch of a tree. The mule carried on and left him suspended in the air. Someone saw him and told Joab, who asked him why he did not kill him, and the man answered that he would not kill the king’s son after the command not to do so. Joab then took some sticks and pinned Absalom to the tree, and his men then killed him. Joab sounded the shofar (horn) showing that the war was over.

When David was told that Absalom was dead he was not pleased but very angry. However Joab told him off severely for this. David returned, the people with a sudden change of heart sent out to bring him back and welcomed him.

On his return, he was uncertain about the ten wives he had left behind. Had they been willing to allow Abasalom to do what he did? Or had they been forced? He suspected the former but had no proof, so he put them in prison and fed them, and they lived as if widows until they died.

[We have left out a number of incidents in the story as they are not part of the story as a whole.]

David’s troubles were not yet over, but that is another story.