

Absalom

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1. [Heb *'abšālôm*—'father is (or 'of') peace']; also **ABISHALOM** ə-bish ə-ləm [Heb *'abišālôm*] (1 K. 15:2, 10). David's third son by Maacah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur (a small country between Hermon and Bashan). Absalom was born at Hebron (2 S. 3:3), and moved at an early age, with the transfer of the capital, to Jerusalem, where he spent most of his life. He was a great favorite of his father and of the people as well. His charming manners, his personal beauty, his ingratiating ways, together with his love of pomp and royal pretensions, captivated the hearts of the people from the beginning. He lived in great style and drove in a magnificent chariot with fifty men running before him. Such magnificence produced the desired effect upon the hearts of the young aristocrats of the royal city (15:1ff).

I. His Exile

When Amnon his half-brother ravished his sister Tamar, and David shut his eyes to the grave crime and neglected to administer proper punishment, Absalom became justly enraged, yet quietly nourished his anger. After a lapse of two years he carried out a successful plan to avenge the rape of Tamar. He made a great feast for the king's sons at Baal-hazor, to which, among others, Amnon came, only to meet his death at the hands of Absa-

lom's servants (2 S. 13:1ff). To avoid punishment Absalom fled to the court of his maternal grandfather in Geshur, where he remained until David had relented and condoned the murderous act of his impetuous, plotting son. At the end of three years (13:38) Joab finally secured Absalom's recall to Jerusalem. It was two years later, however, before he was admitted to the royal presence (14:28).

II. Rebellion Against His Father

Absalom, reinstated, lost no opportunity to regain lost prestige; and having made up his mind to succeed his father upon the throne, sacrificed family loyalty to political ambition. Overtly gracious and rich in promises, especially to the disgruntled and disenchanted, he found it easy enough to attract a following. His purpose was clear, namely, to alienate as many as possible from the king, and thus neutralize David's influence in the selection of a successor. Absalom fully realized that the court party, under the influence of Bathsheba, was intent upon having Solomon as the next ruler. By much flattery Absalom stole the hearts of many men in Israel (15:6).

How long a period elapsed between his return from Geshur and his open rebellion against his father David is uncertain. Most authorities regard the

“forty years” of 1 S. 15:7 as an error and, following the Syriac and some editions of the LXX, suggest four as the correct reading. Whether forty or four, he obtained permission from the king to visit Hebron, the ancient capital, on pretense of fulfilling a vow he had made while at Geshur regarding his safe return to Jerusalem. With two hundred men he went to Hebron. Prior to the feast, spies had been sent throughout all the tribes of Israel to stir up the discontented and to assemble them under Absalom’s flag at Hebron. Very large numbers obeyed the call, among them Ahithophel, one of David’s shrewdest counselors (15:7ff).

III. David’s Flight

Reports of the conspiracy at Hebron soon reached David, who became thoroughly frightened and lost no time in leaving Jerusalem. Under the protection of his most loyal bodyguard he fled to Gilead beyond Jordan. David was kindly received at Mahanaim, where he remained till after the death of his disloyal son. Zadok and Abiathar, two leading priests, were intent upon sharing David’s fortunes and went so far as to carry the ark of the covenant with them out of Jerusalem (2 S. 15:24). David, however, forced the priests and Levites to take it back to its place in the city and remain there as its guardians. This was a prudent stroke, for these two great priests in Jerusalem acted as intermediaries, and through their sons and some influential women kept up constant communications with David’s army in Gilead (15:24ff). Hushai, too, was sent back to Jerusalem. He feigned allegiance to Absalom, who by this time had entered the royal city and had assumed control of the government (15:32ff). Hushai, the priests, and a few less conspicuous people performed their part well; Ahithophel’s counsel, to take immediate action and advance upon the king’s forces in the midst of the turmoil, was thwarted (17:1ff). Moreover, spies constantly informed David’s headquarters of Absalom’s plans (17:15ff). The delay was fatal to the rebel son. Had Absalom acted upon the shrewd counsel of Ahithophel, David’s army might have been conquered at the outset.

IV. Death and Burial

When at length Absalom’s forces under the generalship of Amasa (2 S. 17:25) reached Gilead, ample time had been given to David to organize his army. There were three divisions under the efficient

command of three veteran generals: Joab, Abishai, and Ittai (18:1ff). A great battle was fought in the forests of Ephraim, where the rebel army was utterly routed. No fewer than twenty thousand were killed outright, and a still greater number, becoming entangled in the thick forest, perished that day (18:7f). Among the latter was Absalom himself; when he fled upon his mule, his head was caught in the boughs of a great oak or terebinth, probably in a forked branch. “He was taken up between heaven and earth; and the mule that was under him went on” (18:9). Thus he was found by a soldier who at once ran to inform Joab. Without a moment’s hesitation, and notwithstanding David’s definite orders, Joab thrust three darts into Absalom’s heart. Encouraged by the action of their general, ten of Joab’s young men “compassed about and smote Absalom, and slew him” (18:15). He was buried in a great pit, close to the spot where he was killed. A great pile of stones was heaped over his body (18:17), in accordance with the custom of dishonoring rebels and great criminals (Josh. 7:26; 8:29).

V. David’s Lament

The death of Absalom was a source of great grief to his fond and aged father. David’s lament at the gate of Mahanaim, though very brief, is a classic, and expresses in tender language the feelings of parents for wayward children in all ages of the world (2 S. 18:33).

Little is known of Absalom’s family life, but we read in 14:27 that he had three sons and one daughter. From the language of 18:18, it is inferred that the sons died at an early age.

VI. Absalom’s Tomb

As Absalom had no son to perpetuate his memory “he reared up for himself a pillar” or a monument, in the King’s Dale, which according to Josephus was two furlongs from Jerusalem (*Ant.* vii.10.3). Nothing is known with certainty about this monument. One of the several tombs on the east side of Kidron traditionally has been called Absalom’s tomb; but this fine piece of masonry with its graceful cupola and Ionic pillars is probably not earlier than the Roman period.

W. W. Davies

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