

## 2 Samuel 14:1-33

### Absalom's Exile and Return

**2 Samuel 14:1** - "Now Joab the son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's heart was toward Absalom."

..."against," not toward Absalom. David's emotions were mixed - he loved his son, but could not condone the murder of Amnon, while at the same time recognizing his own guilt in bringing this increasing family disintegration upon them all.

The people probably saw Absalom as the hero of the story, inflicting vengeance on Amnon for his rape and dishonor of Tamar. But they perhaps did not consider that Absalom had also removed the son who stood in his way to become the future king.

Absalom had fled to Geshur, the kingdom ruled by his grandfather Talmai. It was a Gentile nation located around the area of the Golan Heights in Syria, but linked by treaty with Israel through the marriage of Absalom's mother Maachah to King David.

Joab, who is fiercely loyal to David, is concerned that Absalom's exile in Geshur is not only causing King David to be depressed, but also is a ticking time bomb that could tear the kingdom apart. Perhaps he agreed with the maxim to "keep your friends close and your enemies closer." It would be easier to monitor any plots by Absalom if he were nearby.

The rabbis recalled that Joab had killed Abner in revenge for his brother Asahel's murder (**2 Samuel 3:30**). By convincing David to show leniency to Absalom for his crime of passion, perhaps he thought he could assure his own pardon.

So Joab devises a plan - arranging for a scripted presentation before the king to emotionally manipulate David into allowing Absalom to return.

This was akin to Nathan's parable that had previously convicted David. Joab hoped it would have a similar effect.

The wise woman of Tekoa presents a tale that might be true but would not be easy to verify, concerning her two sons. One killed the other, the murderer was sheltered in her house, but the rest of the family was trying to avenge the murder, demanding she give up her last remaining son to be executed.

### The Story from the Wise Woman of Tekoa

Like in the case of Amnon and Tamar (but unlike Absalom's murder of Amnon), there were no witnesses to her sons' struggle. Without witnesses, no case could be brought, so it was left to kinsman avengers to settle things. They demanded his death.

**2 Samuel 14:6** - "...there was none to part them, but the one smote the other, and slew

him."

This hinted that if only David had intervened between Amnon and Absalom (by punishing Amnon) then Absalom would not have been forced to take action. "One smote the other" in the Hebrew could indicate that this was an act of self-defense. So in effect, Absalom's murder of Amnon could be said to be simply responding to aggression against the honor of his sister.

It was not unusual for someone like this woman, who felt they had been unjustly treated in their town, to appeal to the king. She knows that justice requires the son's death, but is begging for mercy:

"My lord, O king, let the iniquity be on me and on my father's house, and the king and his throne be guiltless" (**2 Samuel 14:9**).

The rabbis felt the details of this woman's story reveal something about Absalom's situation. When she mentions her son was the heir, they conclude that some of David's other sons were pressuring to banish Absalom in order to eliminate him as an heir, leaving any future inheritance for themselves.

The rabbis say that if someone murders another, and there are no witnesses as well as someone to warn the criminal of the illegality of his actions, no criminal case can be made.

It seems that before her son could flee to a city of refuge, he became trapped in his mother's home. The whole idea of the cities of refuge was to protect those suspected of murder like her son. When she exhorts David to "let the king remember the LORD thy God" the Targum explains this means to "remember the Law of the Lord," referring to the command to set up the cities of refuge.

David was moved by her story, and promises, "As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground." (**2 Samuel 14:11**)

As king, David could overrule local judges. But he was wrong to ignore justice in this case - the son had indeed murdered his brother, like Cain and Abel. David ignored the cause of justice for the sake of family sympathy and loyalty.

Then the woman turns the focus on David himself and Absalom:

"Why then have you schemed such a thing against the people of God? For the king speaks this thing as one who is guilty, in that the king does not bring his banished one home again." (**2 Samuel 14:13**)

When she speaks directly to the case of Absalom, she makes several points:

- Everyone dies, so Amnon would have died anyway, "like water spilled on the ground cannot be recovered." Absalom simply brought his end end sooner. (**verse 14**)

- Just as God designed the cities of refuge as sanctuary for accidental murderers, so He doesn't want to banish anyone, but devises a way for those banished to "be not expelled from Him." In fact they are freed at the death of the High Priest from the city of refuge.

- David is like an angel of God, not swayed by emotions of anger, but discerns good and bad righteously.

The rabbis explain that David had repented so deeply after his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, that he could say of himself in all honesty that he had completely conquered his evil inclination (Berachos 61b) and could therefore perfectly discern good from evil. Of course, this was not true of David, but it was true of the Messiah, Jesus the Son of David:

- **Isaiah 11:3-4** - "And He will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what His eyes see, and He will not decide by what His ears hear, but with righteousness He will judge the poor, and with equity He will decide for the lowly of the earth."

David now understands that this was a set-up: "Is not the hand of Joab with thee in all this?"

Nevertheless, David makes a decision: "bring the young man Absalom again... Let him turn to his own house, and let him not see my face." Perhaps David felt the exile had been punishment enough.

Joab's plan apparently worked. He hoped that Absalom's reconciliation with David would prevent a fracturing of political loyalties within Israel. But bringing Absalom back served to aggravate the problem, not solve it. In fact, David didn't really reconcile with Absalom. Where previously David had been too lenient with his sons, now suddenly he was being too harsh.

### **Absalom's Return**

Like Saul (**1 Samuel 9:2**), Absalom was a handsome and striking figure. The Talmudists (Babylonian Talmud, Niddah, fol. 24. 2) make him to be of a gigantic stature. His hair is mentioned as especially thick. (This detail comes into play later at his death, 2 Samuel 18). It is likely that Absalom was now considered by the people as the crown prince, next in line for the throne.

Absalom's hair seems oddly like that of someone under a Nazarite vow.

Those who take the Nazarite vow allow their hair to grow long as a sign of humility. This is because the hairs on our head represent our sins.

- **Psalms 40:12** - "For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of

mine head: therefore my heart faileth me."

In contrast, the High Priest was forbidden to let his hair "grow wild" - "he shall not leave his hair unshorn" (**Leviticus 21:10**) since he was required to enter the presence of God in the Holy of Holies once a year.

Thus, this display served as a continual confession of one's sins and spiritual weakness and vulnerability, and that humility was called the Nazarite's "crown."

At the end of the Nazarite vow, the hair was shorn and then thrown into the fire under the cauldron that was boiling the cut-up animal offered as the Peace Offering. This shows that our hair/sins therefore serve a purpose in bringing us to humility, which results in our partaking of the Peace Offering.

In the same vein, a leprous person must let his hair be unbound as a sign of uncleanness:

- **Leviticus 13:45** - "As for the diseased person who has the infection, his clothes must be torn, the hair of his head must be unbound (or unkempt, disheveled), he must cover his mustache, and he must call out 'Unclean! Unclean!'"

One school of thought said Absalom actually was a Nazarite:

"Absalom was a life-Nazirite, for it says, 'And it came to pass at the end of forty years that Absalom said to the king: [pray thee, let me go and pay my vow which I have vowed unto the Lord in Hebron.'" (See **2 Samuel 14:25-26**; **2 Samuel 15:7**)

- Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Nazir, Folio 4b

Well, no. Absalom's attitude toward his hair was the opposite of a Nazarite's. It was a declaration of his vanity and pride, which eventually led to his downfall. His quest for recognition may have motivated him to make a public ritual out of his hair cutting. Some of the rabbis said he powdered his hair with the dust of gold, to make it look yellow and glistening.

We should also notice that David considers that a single hair, although seemingly insignificant, is also something God takes keen notice of:

**2 Samuel 14:11** - "...As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground"

- **Matthew 10:29-31** - "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

The idea is that the hairs of one's head are too many to number, but God keeps close track of everything.

### **Absalom's Character**

"One daughter whose name was Tamar": Absalom was a man of deep and sympathetic feeling. He memorialized his wronged sister Tamar by naming a daughter after her. [The Septuagint adds "and she became the wife of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, and bore to him Abia."]

He was also ruthless. After waiting two years in limbo, without knowing the king's attitude toward him, he asked for a meeting with Joab. Joab ignored his requests, so Absalom had his servants set fire to Joab's barley fields to get his attention.

Absalom was also bold and not afraid to "roll the dice."

When Joab shows up, Absalom doesn't explain or apologize for burning his field, but voices his complaint: "Wherefore am I come from Geshur? it had been good for me to have been there still: now therefore let me see the king's face; and if there be any iniquity in me, let him kill me" (**2 Samuel 14:32**).

So Joab tells the king. David calls Absalom to the court, and finally receives him and kisses him. But this was not a warm reception, it was a cold kiss according to the rabbis.

David does not "rehabilitate" Absalom's reputation. He orders that Absalom must not enter his own house publicly from the main street, and never come to see David's face or visit the court.

And unlike the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, Absalom returns in pride and self-justification.

Underneath all this, a seed of rebellion was seething in Absalom.

## Summary

What does all this have to do with us?

Within the story of the wise woman of Tekoa, is a truth about redemption - God finds a way to bring us back to Himself. Maybe this is why she is called "wise."

David could not find a way to do this with Absalom while at the same time preserving justice. But God does.

**2 Samuel 14:14** - "For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him."

"neither doth God respect any person" - Or better, as in the NET - "God does not take away life; instead he devises ways for the banished to be restored." i.e. when a man has sinned, instead of putting him to death, God is ready to forgive and welcome back someone rejected because of his sin.

David has his own case immediately before him - instead of inflicting the death penalty which he deserved for the murder of Uriah, God forgave David.

Of course, this required his repentance and contrition, which Absalom does not show. But the statement is true.

We can see it all the way back in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve are "banished." Although God said they would die if they ate the fruit, He preserved their natural life. Jewish tradition says when Adam became conscious of the gravity of his sin he repented, fasting for forty days, during which he stood up to his neck in the waters of the river Gihon as a kind of baptism (Genesis Rabbah 22.13). "Gihon" is etymologically connected by the writer with the roots "to stoop" and "to pray aloud" (Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer 20).

In the same way, God did not inflict the death penalty on Cain, but banished him to wander. He put the "mark" of the tau or cross on him for protection, and Cain knew that the sin offering was available by the door, waiting for him to repent, which conceivably could end his banishment.

In fact, God "devised the means" through which those banished could be retrieved to Himself through Jesus' death on the cross, the "Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world," which both maintained God's justice and expressed His mercy at the same time.

### **'He Makes a Way for Us'**

Humanity has been banished, exiled from God's presence, like Adam and Eve.

Everyone feels as if they are in exile, whether they can describe it or not. They feel lonely, vulnerable and powerless. They feel exposed to randomness, without clear direction or meaning in their lives. We feel threatened by unseen dangers and unspoken fears.

The different stories in the Bible describe different aspects of this. For instance, God confused the languages at the Tower of Babel. Now, people always have a nagging feeling they are being misunderstood.

Remember the Philistine's punishment of Samson - blinded and grinding at a millstone all day - could picture the hollowness and pointlessness people feel about their jobs.

The Bible reflects the whole human condition.

Left only with ourselves, we feel adrift in a huge, meaningless universe.

But God "devises means, that his banished be not expelled from him."

Through the Cross, God makes a way for us to return home, to Him.

- **Deuteronomy 32:10-11** - "He found him in a desert land, in a barren, howling wilderness; He surrounded him, He instructed him, He guarded him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, He spread His wings to catch them and carried them on His pinions."

That's the promise that is hidden in this story of trickery and pride, of a family falling apart. And we need to take it to heart.