

Joab

In our daily readings of late, we have been considering the example of David, and those who were with him. For our exhortation today, we shall consider the character of Joab, the captain of David's army.

The first point to notice about Job, is that he was related to David. The record in Chronicles speaks of David "whose sisters were Zuriyah and Abigail. And the sons of Zuriyah; Abishai, and Joab, and Asahel, three" (1 Chron. 2:16). This would make Joab David's nephew, and this family association may well have a bearing on the events that would transpire between them. Be that as it may, he became the captain of David's army (see 2 Sam. 8:16), and remained such for the most part throughout David's reign, until he rebelled at the last.

Picking up the record of 2 Samuel, we read of the way in which Abner slew Asahel, Joab's brother. After a particular skirmish between Abner, the captain of Saul's army, and Joab, David's captain, Asahel chased after Abner:

"and Abner said again to Asahel, Turn thee aside from following me: wherefore should I smite thee to the ground? How then should I hold up my face to Joab thy brother? Howbeit he refused to turn aside: wherefore Abner with the hinder end of the spear smote him under the fifth rib, that the spear came out behind him; and he fell down there, and died in the same place ..." (2 Sam. 2:23).

The events that follow provide an insight into the character of Joab: he sought vengeance for his brother's spilt blood. 2 Samuel 3 recounts how David made peace with Abner, who humbled himself before the king, in recognition of the Divine promises: "to translate the kingdom from the house of Saul, and to set up the throne of David over Israel and Judah, from Dan even to Beer-sheba" (2 Sam. 3:10). But rather than to recognise the peace treaty, Joab took matters into his own hands:

"and when Abner was returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside in the gate to speak with him quietly, and smote him there under the fifth rib, that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother" (2 Sam. 3:27).

And again, we read that:

"so Joab and Abishai his brother slew Abner, because he had slain their brother Asahel at Gibeon in the battle" (2 Sam. 3:30).

Although Joab slew Abner under the pretext of it being for the good of the kingdom, it is evident that the real reason was because of Asahel's death, and the need to avenge it. The Apostle Paul taught: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). Yet this is what Joab had done, which displeased David very greatly:

"And afterward, when David heard it, he said, I and my kingdom are guiltless before Yahweh for ever from the blood of Abner the son of Ner: Let it rest on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house ..." (2 Sam. 3:28-29).

Maybe there is an allusion to this event in Psalm 7: "O Yahweh my God, if I have done this; if there be iniquity in my hands; If I have rewarded evil unto him that was at peace with me; (yea, I have

delivered him that without cause is mine enemy:) Let the enemy persecute my soul, and take it ...” (Psa. 7:3-5).

It would appear that Joab was a valiant warrior, as the captain of David’s army. He became chief because of his courageous defeat of the Jebusites: “and David said, Whosoever smiteth the Jebusites first shall be chief and captain. So Joab the son of Zeruiah went first up, and was chief” (1 Chron. 11:6). He was evidently a very focussed individual, devoted to service as a good soldier – even more than king David on one occasion which we shall shortly consider. Again, Paul wrote concerning those who engage in the warfare of faith:

“Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:3-4).

This was the spirit of Joab: a mighty man, who fearlessly discharged his duty as a soldier of David’s guard. However, David himself, who was chosen of Yahweh to be a good soldier did become entangled with the affairs of this life. 2 Samuel 11 recounts his rather sordid affair with Bath-Sheba, and Joab had his part to play in this matter also.

DAVID AND BATH-SHEBA

The narrative of 2 Samuel 11 recounts how that on an occasion where Joab went out to war, David remained at home:

“And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel: and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem” (2 Sam. 11:1).

The record continues to describe how David beheld Bath-Sheba washing herself, and the chain of events that led to him committing adultery with her. Moreover, to compound his sin further, he gave instruction for Joab to set her husband Uriah “in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die” (2 Sam. 11:15). And Joab complied without protest. Uriah was also an example of one who refused to be entangled with the affairs of this life, and was loyal to his master to the end. The Psalms, particularly Psalms 51 and 32 recount the depths of David’s repentance, yet the record of David’s life is blighted by this matter: “a dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour” (Ecc. 10:1).

Joab seems to be uncomplaining, and complicit in the matter. He gave Uriah over to the hands of the Ammonitish enemy, which brought about his death. Perhaps it is in a similar way, that the Jews handed the Lord over to the Romans, and had him put to death by their hand. Certainly, it is the way that Saul sought to have David himself slain by the hand of the Philistines: a fleshly way of dealing with a problem that never should have arisen.

ABSALOM’S REBELLION

The record continues in 2 Samuel 14 to describe the circumstances of Absalom being reunited with his father David, at the instigation of Joab. The Lord taught “blessed are the peace makers” (Mat. 5:9), and this is what Joab turned out to be on this occasion. However Absalom rebelled against his father, and sought to take the kingdom, necessitating David and his household to flee. There were many who fled with David, as indicated when “David numbered the people that were with him, and set captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds over them” (2 Sam. 18:1). In his strategy to take control of the kingdom again, David gave instruction concerning his wayward son:

“and the king commanded Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, Deal gently for my sake with the young man, even with Absalom. And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains charge concerning Absalom” (2 Sam. 18:5).

Joab, however, disregarded the command of the king, and slew his son: “... he took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Absalom” (vs. 14), and so killed him. Perhaps he was doing so, bearing in mind the commandment of the Law: “he that curseth his father, or his mother, shall surely be put to death” (Exo. 21:17). This certainly applied to Absalom, who sought the destruction of his own father.

David, however, was much displeased, and wept for his son – see 2 Samuel 19:1-8. And it would appear that it was for this reason that he replaced Joab as captain of the host: “and say ye to Amasa, Art thou not of my bond, and of my flesh? God do so to me and more also, if thou be not captain of the host before me continually in the room of Joab” (2 Sam. 19:13). So it was that Joab was deposed, and Amasa exalted as head of the Armies of Israel. Joab, however, was keen to have his job back, and killed Amasa to obtain his goal – so it was that he slew two captains of Israel: Abner and Amasa. David later commanded Solomon:

“Moreover thou knowest also what Joab the son of Zeruiah did to me, and what he did to the two captains of the hosts of Israel, unto Abner the son of Ner, and unto Amasa the son of Jether, whom he slew, and **shed the blood of war in peace**, and put the blood of war upon his girdle that was about his loins, and in his shoes that were on his feet” (1 Kings 2:5)

And again:

“And the Lord shall return his blood upon his own head, who fell upon two men **more righteous and better than he**, and slew them with the sword, my father David not knowing thereof, to wit, Abner the son of Ner, captain of the host of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jether, captain of the host of Judah” (1 Kings 2:32).

THE NUMBERING OF ISRAEL

2 Samuel chapter 24 recounts the occasion when David was moved to number Israel – and Joab protested:

“And Joab said unto the king, Now Yahweh thy God add unto the people, how many soever they be, an hundredfold, and that the eyes of my lord the king may see it: but why doth my lord the king delight in this thing? Notwithstanding the king’s word prevailed against Joab and against the captains of the host” (2 Sam. 24:4).

There is a principle in Scripture, that numbers are not too important. Jonathan had the faith that “there is no restraint to Yahweh to save by many of by few” (1 Sam. 14:6). And Jesus himself taught: “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Mat. 7:14). The Truthholders have always been a minority group in each given generation, but when brought together by the Lord in the kingdom, they will be “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). To desire to number the congregation of God then, is a futile enterprise, with no material benefit. In this matter, Joab proved himself to be more righteous than David, for he appears to have recognised this point.

JOAB’S DEMISE

At the end of David’s life, Adonijah his brother sought to seize control of the kingdom – and Joab supported him: “he conferred with Joab the son of Zeruiah, and with Abiathar the priest: and they following Adonijah helped him” (1 Kings 21:7). For the most part, during the reign of David, Joab was loyal to his king: but at the time of his death, Joab turned against his Lord, and conspired with the High Priest to aid Adonijah’s revolt. As a consequence of this, and for slaying two other captains, Solomon was instructed: “Do therefore according to thy wisdom, and let not his hoar head go down to the grave in peace” (1 Kings 2:6).

Exodus 21:14 reads: “if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him with guile, thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die ...”. This was certainly the case with Joab: when the coup against David failed and Solomon was enthroned instead, Joab – the slayer of two “innocent” men – went into the Tabernacle, and laid hold of the altar:

“Then tidings came to Joab: for Joab had turned after Adonijah, though he turned not after Absalom. And Joab fled unto the tabernacle of Yahweh, and caught hold on the horns of the altar” (1 Kings 2:28).

Subsequently, the king gave the command, and Joab was slain whilst grasping the horns of the Altar: “... and Yahweh shall return his blood upon his own head, who fell upon two men more righteous and better than he, and slew them with the sword, my father David not knowing thereof, to wit, Abner the son of Ner, captain of the host of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jether, captain of the host of Judah. Their blood shall therefore return upon the head of Joab, and upon the head of his seed for ever ...’ (1 Kings 2:31-33).

The name “Joab” signifies “Yah is Father”, and he chose Adonijah, whose name means “the Lord Is Yah”, instead of David, the “beloved”. The name “Barabbas” means “son of the Father”, and he was chosen by the people instead of Jesus, God’s Beloved Son. But the Lord “through the eternal spirit offered himself without spot to God” (Heb. 9:14). He was, as it were, the acceptable sacrifice upon the Altar. As the antitypical Altar, the true believers approach him in faith, to be sanctified by association with him (cp. Exo. 29:37). Joab, although he was right in some things – like protesting against David numbering Israel – was fundamentally a man of the flesh. Like so many men, he knew what he wanted, and had the determination, and courage to succeed: he would stop at nothing to secure his position, even to the killing of the “innocent”. He forsook David at his most vulnerable state, just before his death, and thus displayed his true character. Though he laid hold upon the Altar, it did not sanctify him, but he was rather slain there. But by contrast, the true believers offer up their lives in Sacrifice (Rom. 12:1) and will so be rewarded by the Greater than Solomon, the prince of peace, at the commencement of his reign.

Christopher Maddocks