

2 SAMUEL 20:8-10: A NOTE FOR A COMMENTARY

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After the revolt of Absalom had been crushed, David found it necessary to set about the task of reconsolidating his shattered kingdom. At the revolt of Sheba ben-Bichri, David sent his troops north. Amasa, the newly appointed leader, was late arriving and joined the army at the great rock of Gibeon. Joab, the former commander, went out to meet him and with a deadly bit of deception killed him.

Why Joab killed Amasa is rather plain. David in trying to regroup after the Absalom disaster had to make special concessions to his own people, the tribe of Judah, in order to regain their support (cf. 2 Sam 19:11-12), much to the displeasure of the northern tribes (cf. 19:41-43). Part of the deal was to replace Joab with Amasa as commander of the army (19:13). Amasa, however, proved less than satisfactory in the position (cf. 20:5-6), and Joab, by killing him, reasserted himself as commander.

The problem is not why but precisely how Joab worked his treachery. Following the RSV, the text in 2 Sam 20:8b-10 reads as follows:

Now Joab was wearing a soldier's garment, and over it was a girdle with a sword in its sheath fastened upon his loins, and as he went forward it fell out.⁹ And Joab said to Amasa, "Is it well with you, my brother?" And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him.¹⁰ But Amasa did not observe the sword which was in Joab's hand; so Joab struck him with it in the body, and shed his bowels to the ground, without striking a second blow; and he died.

It has often been assumed by commentaries that the text as it stands in Hebrew is corrupt, that it does not as it now stands give the entire picture. Either something has fallen out or the present text must be amended to restore a clear view of Joab's action. The meaning of the text as it stands, however, would seem to be a great deal more plain than commentaries have been wont to make it.

Two theories as to the nature of the deception have enjoyed widespread support.

The first is that the sword of Joab is a short sword or dagger that is not worn on the outside of Joab's outer garment but is in fact hidden beneath it.¹ Thus the deception is similar to that of Ehud the Benjamite in Judges 3. Since the text does not specifically say that the sword fell to the ground it is suggested that the dagger was hidden blade upward under Joab's garment so it could fall, hilt first, out of the overlying garment into his hand unseen by Amasa, whose attention was drawn elsewhere. However, the use of *w'lw* ("over it," v 8b) certainly indicates that the sword was girded on the outside of Joab's clothing and therefore not concealed at all.

The second theory, acknowledging that a sword is outside in plain view, posits

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¹Cf. H. P. Smith, *Samuel* (ICC; 1899); H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (1964).

the presence of an unmentioned second weapon. In addition to the sword girded outside the garment, Joab had a second dagger concealed within.² Joab contrives for the outside visible sword to fall to the ground in order to allay the suspicions of Amasa, whom he then kills with the hidden weapon. In this vein the following emendation of v 8b has been proposed:³ *wyw'b hrb bydw mtht lbwšw w'lyw hgw' hrb mšmdt* ("And Joab, a sword was in his hand underneath his garment, and upon it a sword was girded . . ."). But, as with any emendation, this requires changing the text.

The explanation of Joab's treachery is much more simple than assuming either a second dagger or a concealed weapon. Joab is girded and attired like any soldier on his way to war. As he goes out⁴ to meet Amasa who is belatedly joining the army, his sword falls out of its sheath. One can assume that even a seasoned veteran such as Joab could have an equipment malfunction at an unguarded moment. Probably an embarrassment similar to that of a modern soldier whose rifle slips off his shoulder but an occasional happening nonetheless, it is certainly in this case contrived by Joab. With a natural motion, given such circumstances, he picks it up with his left hand and continues to greet Amasa. The specific reference of the text to the right hand is intentional. The right hand is the hand with which one does battle. It is empty here, and thus no threat is implied. In fact it is used to grasp the beard as part of the greeting kiss so common among kinsmen and friends.⁵ The "accidentally" dropped sword dangling idly in the left hand is not a recognizable danger. Such is not a posture of combat or offense. Amasa, completely taken in by the ruse of Joab and by the friendly greeting, pays no attention⁶ to the weapon that with a single blow works his demise. The narrator by telling us that the sword fell out and that Joab used his right hand to grasp the beard of Amasa and that Amasa paid no attention to the sword in Joab's hand (the left hand is the only one available since the right one is occupied) tells us clearly what happened. For him to explain further would be to insult the intelligence of his reader. The text tells us all that needs to be told to make clear the clever and treacherous ploy of Joab in his assassination of Amasa.⁷

²Cf. G. B. Caird (*IB*; 1953).

³Cf. S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (1890); A. Klostermann, *Die Bücher Samuelis und der Könige ausgelegt* (1887).

⁴*BHK*³ suggests an emendation to *w'ht' yāš'e'ā* instead of the written *w'hu' yāšā'*. This would put the phrase into the feminine and thus make *hrb* the antecedent as it is also the subject of *wattippōl*. This also agrees with LXX, which reads *kai hē machaira exēlthen kai epesen*. However, it is clear that LXX has merely exhibited an ignorance of Hebrew grammar. The original reading stands, for it is Joab who went out and the sword that fell out. So it is correctly rendered by the RSV.

⁵Cf. Jacob and Esau in Gen 33:4, Absalom in 2 Sam 15:5, and in modern times as a common greeting among the Arabs (so C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Book of Samuel* [1880]). For a kiss used in betrayal, cf. the rather obvious NT example of Judas. Also cf. 1 Sam 17:35 where David speaks of killing a lion or a bear by grasping it by the beard.

⁶The phrase *lō' nišmar* can mean either "not to see" or "not to pay attention to." Thus it can be assumed that Amasa simply ignored the sword, not necessarily that he failed to see it.

⁷This solution appears to be recognized but not emphasized in S. Goldman, *Samuel I & II* (1951); A. F. Kirkpatrick, *I & II Samuel* (1919).