

A JONADAB CONNECTION IN THE ABSALOM CONSPIRACY?

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Jonadab the son of David's brother Shimeah (Shammah, 1 Sam 16:9; 17:13) appears in the OT record only in chap. 13 of the Succession Narrative, that much-praised piece of ancient Israelite historiography documenting Solomon's installation on the Davidic throne.¹ His role in the Amnon-Tamar-Absalom triangle has long puzzled Biblical commentators, and that for two reasons: (1) because of the ill-fated advice he gave to the crown prince Amnon (2 Sam 13:3-5), and (2) on account of his uncanny foreknowledge of the events surrounding Absalom's vengeful murder of Amnon (13:32-35). This note seeks to elucidate Jonadab's role in the narrative by affording an explanation for his advice to Amnon and subsequent behavior in the royal court on the basis of all known pertinent data, Biblical or otherwise.

Jonadab is an acknowledged "friend" (*rēa'*) of Amnon (13:3). While it is possible that he was a close personal friend of Amnon since he was a cousin, it seems more likely that the word here connotes a special office or association with the royal family (especially in light of his role as a counselor in David's cabinet; cf. 13:32-35). During Solomon's reign, Zabud son of Nathan has the title of priest and "king's friend" (*rē'eh hammelek*, 1 Kgs 4:5). It may well be that with Jonadab (and others?) this cabinet post has its rudimentary beginnings in the Davidic monarchy.

Even more significant, Jonadab is called a "wise" man (*hākām*, 2 Sam 13:3). The majority of translators take this to mean "crafty" or "shrewd" due to the criminal nature of his advice to Amnon.² Yet S. R. Driver noted that "subtil"

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¹Traditionally Biblical scholars delineate 2 Samuel 9-20; 1 Kings 1-2 as the specific contents of the Succession Narrative and universally date its composition to the tenth century B.C. during the early years of Solomon's reign; cf. e.g. D. M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (JSOT Sup 6; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978) 13-16; R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative* (SBT; Naperville: Allenson, 1969) 11-47. While acknowledging the outstanding literary artistry of the narrative noted by Gunn, *Story* 17-84, and W. Brueggemann, "Life and Death in Tenth Century Israel," *JAAR* 40 (1972) 96-109, I reject in part the extreme conclusions of Whybray, *Succession* 45-55, as to the ahistorical nature of the document. Granted the political and apologetic character of the narrative, this need not negate the factuality of the recorded history (even so Whybray, *Succession* 18-19). Here I agree with S. R. Driver, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1909) 182, and Sellin-Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 222, who affirm the Succession Narrative as an historical document within the limits set by the author's own interests.

²E.g. H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 323; J. M. Ward, "Jonadab," *IDB*, 2. 964; H. P. Müller, "*hākām*," *TDOT* 4 (1980) 364-385; *JB*; *NEB*; *RSV*.

"is scarcely a fair paraphrase: the text says that Jonadab was *wise*."³ He concludes that had the writer intended to convey a meaning of "shrewd" or "crafty" he would have used *ārôm* or another such word (cf. Gen 3:1). H. P. Smith remarked that "Jonadab his cousin and intimate friend was a *very wise man*, though in this case his wisdom was put to base uses."⁴ Most recently K. P. McCarter interprets Jonadab to be "very wise," while acknowledging that our English connotation of "wise" may be a misleading translation.⁵ I concur with Driver and the others cited on the understanding of Jonadab as a very wise man. In addition, I posit that the ploy suggested by Jonadab to Amnon for the seduction of Tamar was known to him by virtue of his standing in the royal court as a sage.

According to H. P. Müller, "after the beginning of the monarchy, it is commonly understood that the root *hkm* refers above all to the academic wisdom of the court and the ideals of the class entrusted with it."⁶ Furthermore, recent study has shown considerable Egyptian influence on a wide range of OT literary types, most notably Hebrew wisdom.⁷ In recognition of this fact, R. N. Whybray states that

we cannot dismiss the considered opinion of S. Morenz, who claims that the presence at Solomon's court of bilingual officials with a competent knowledge of Egyptian writing must be regarded, in view of what we now know of that court and its diplomatic relations with Egypt, as absolutely beyond question; and what is true of Solomon's court may reasonably be supposed to be true of David's also.⁸

Given this Egyptian influence in the Israelite united monarchy and the knowledge of and access to Egyptian literature, my contention is that Jonadab was not only skilled in the academic wisdom of the royal court but also had some familiarity with Egyptian literature.

The particular issue in question is Jonadab's counsel to Amnon to feign illness (probably not too difficult since he was already "haggard") and then make an innocent request of King David who would no doubt come and inquire about the crown prince's health (2 Sam 13:4–5). This same motif occurs in the Egyptian love poetry of the New Kingdom (c. 1570–1085 B.C.).⁹ One song is

³Driver, *Introduction* 229 (italics his).

⁴H. P. Smith, *The Books of Samuel* (ICC; Edinburgh; T. and T. Clark, 1899) 328 (italics his).

⁵K. P. McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB 9; New York: Doubleday, 1984) 321.

⁶Müller, *TDOT* 4 (1980) 373.

⁷Cf. McCarter, *II Samuel* 320–321; W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 51–150; R. E. Murphy, "Hebrew Wisdom," *JAOS* 101 (1981) 25–26; *Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (VTSup 3; ed. M. Noth and D. W. Thomas; 1960); R. Weill, "Les transmissions littéraires d'Égypte à Israël," *REG* 1 (1950) 43–61; Whybray, *Succession* 96–116; R. J. Williams, "The Sages of Ancient Egypt in the Light of Recent Scholarship," *JAOS* 101 (1981) 1–20.

⁸Whybray, *Succession* 97.

⁹For a catalog of the parallels between Egyptian and Israelite love poetry and commentary on the interrelationships of the two see M. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7C; New York: Doubleday, 1977) 54–84; J. B. White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry* (SBLDS 38; Missoula: Scholars, 1978). Cf. McCarter, *II Samuel* 320–322, on the "lovesickness" motif of a man for his "sister" (i.e. lover) in Egyptian love poetry.

translated as follows by W. K. Simpson:

Now I'll lie down inside
and act as if I'm sick.
My neighbors will come in to visit,
and with them my girl.
She'll put the doctors out,
for she's the one to know my hurt.¹⁰

Here the scenario is slightly different and the cast of characters has changed. The basic story line remains the same, however. The man in love pretends to be stricken with a malady. Naturally, visitors concerned about his well-being will arrive, and out of all this the young man will eventually end up alone with his lover so that she can attend to his "needs." In the case of Amnon there is no reciprocation on the part of Tamar, and he must coerce her to have sexual relations with him (13:11–15). While Amnon achieved a degree of immediate gratification in this release of pent-up lust for Tamar, the more long-term ramifications of the misdeed are entirely predictable.¹¹

Unlike those who view this counsel of Jonadab to Amnon as bad advice because it concerned itself only with methods and failed to calculate the consequences, I am convinced that Jonadab knew full well the ultimate outcome of his counsel.¹² The illness ploy, borrowed from Egyptian love poetry, was maliciously designed to exploit Amnon's domination by sensuality (a trait he shared with his father David). More than this, I am inclined to see Jonadab as a co-conspirator with Absalom in the whole affair, since both men have much to gain.

Absalom's desires for revenge against Amnon and ultimately his designs for usurping his father's throne are clearly seen in the narrative (cf. 13:21–23, 32; 15:1–6). Amnon, as crown prince, stands in the way as a rival to the ambitions of Absalom. Absalom and Jonadab collaborate to remove this obstacle to kingship by taking advantage of a basic weakness in Amnon's character. The calculated plotting of Absalom and Jonadab is evidenced by the pointed questioning of Tamar by Absalom after her rape and his almost callous treatment of a sister brutally violated and now bereft of a meaningful future (almost as if he expected it, at least according to the tone of the statements in the narrative; cf. 13:20–22). While a most reprehensible allegation, it seems Tamar may have been an unwitting pawn of a devious schemer, an expendable token in the power play for the throne.

Further testimony to the Absalom-Jonadab conspiracy is found in the timetable exposed in the narrative. Absalom coolly bides his time for two years before ostensibly avenging Tamar's rape (13:23), and only after a three-year self-imposed exile in Geshur (the homeland of his mother Maacah, 3:3) does he return to Jerusalem to make preparations for his own kingship by undermining popular allegiance to David (13:39; 15:1–6). Certainly this belies a carefully

¹⁰*The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (2d ed.; ed. W. K. Simpson; New Haven: Yale University, 1973) 300.

¹¹Hertzberg, *II Samuel* 323–324.

¹²Cf. Whybray, *Succession* 59.

constructed strategy for seizing control of the monarchy and bespeaks a man of considerable foresight, determination and ability.

One last proof adduced for a Jonadab connection in the Absalom conspiracy is Jonadab's own response to the rumor supposing the assassination of all the king's sons (13:30). In countering the false report Jonadab betrayed his complete knowledge of the ambush in Baal Hazor (including the participants in the crime, since he confirmed that "they [the servants of Absalom] killed" only Amnon; cf. 13:29, 30–32) before any official or eyewitness news reached Jerusalem. In addition he informed the royal court that Absalom had been plotting his revenge for two years (13:32–33). The only possible explanation for Jonadab's detailed foreknowledge of the bloodletting at Baal Hazor is his involvement in the scheme from its inception.

For his part, Jonadab was no doubt wise enough to discern that Absalom was a more likely and more capable candidate as David's successor. By aiding Absalom in the conspiracy to slay the crown prince, Jonadab was attempting to secure his political future.¹³ With Absalom on the throne perhaps he anticipated appointment to the cabinet position of king's friend or even chief counselor to the king—although the latter apparently was never realized, since Ahithophel moved into that slot when Hushai fled Jerusalem with David (15:12; cf. 15:31–34). In fact, while the motive of advancement in political rank logically explains the behavior of Jonadab, we can only speculate as to the particulars since he exits the narrative after this episode, never to reappear. It is possible that Jonadab died during Absalom's three-year hiatus in Geshur, or upon his return he either forgot Jonadab or he fell out of favor with the new crown prince. Despite the almost annoying paucity of material for careful analysis, Jonadab's character remains an interesting study among the parade of personalities vying for power and position in David's court, and ultimately his role in the Succession Narrative is best understood as that of co-conspirator in the Absalom coup.

¹³Note that this theme is not uncommon in the narrative, since Absalom (2 Sam 15:1–18:18), Joab (20:4–13), Adonijah (1 Kgs 1:5–2:25) and Solomon (1:11–40) all maneuver behind the scenes to enhance their political prospects.