

2ND SAMUEL

Week 31, chapters 20 and 21

This 20th chapter of 2nd Samuel that is often called **Sheva's** Rebellion or revolt shapes today's lesson. We got a little way into it last week as we found the northern 10-tribe coalition that this chapter tends to refer to as Israel having a contentious argument with the 2-tribe southern coalition that is usually called Judah. This fiery meeting took place at Gilgal, the place where David was re-coronated as King of Israel.

Sheva, a Benjamite, is regarded in this episode as a scoundrel (an *ish Belial*) and the one who attempted to foment a civil war.

But the issue of this attempted civil war is briefly interrupted in verse 3 with a mention of the 10 concubines that David left behind at his palace when he fled Jerusalem a few months earlier. And here we find that these violated members of David's harem would be (through no fault of their own) regarded by David as damaged goods and unworthy of his continued relationship with them. So they were set aside, reasonably cared for, but treated as "living widows". In other words they would never know a man again, and would die childless.

Let's re-read a portion of chapter 20 that continues with Sheva's revolt.

RE-READ 2ND SAMUEL CHAPTER 20:4 – 13

David had promised that he would elevate **Amasa**, the general in charge of Absalom's ill fated military, to be his own general of the army and in so doing replace Joab (who had

participated in the killing of **Avishalom**). And having done that, verse 4 has the king telling **Amasa** to form up the men of Judah into an army and to bring them to Jerusalem. The purpose was as a force to counter the tribal army from the north that **Sheva** was attempting to gather. But Amasa was given only 3 days to accomplish this task. One has to wonder why David would demand such a large undertaking to be accomplished in such a short time because by all accounts it was unreasonable and unrealistic to think that Amasa could ride around to the various cities and villages throughout the substantial territory of Judah and Simeon and muster an equipped and ready army in a mere 72 hours. Likely David was simply being impetuous or impatient, and we have no record of Amasa objecting to the impossible assignment as Joab surely would have done. So it was inevitable that (as verse 5 says) Amasa missed his appointment.

Thus when Amasa didn't show up with the men in 3 days, David immediately turned to **Avishai** (Joab's brother and another of his long-time field commanders) and told him that it was urgent that he go after Sheva before he caused more damage than Absalom had done. David was so anxious to short circuit **Sheva's** anti-government actions that he instructed **Avishai** to take only the much smaller forces that David calls "his servants". In other words, these men (who are usually identified as the **P'leti and K'reti**) were more or less David's private army. These were men who were especially loyal to him and were essentially a small standing army of professional soldiers (not at all like the militia of tribesmen that Amasa was instructed to go and round up). Apparently Joab also had a group of professional soldiers that he had separately maintained and so Avishai took them as well to pursue Sheva.

Verse 8 explains that a few days later at Gibeon, a city in the tribal territory of Benjamin, **Amasa** finally showed up with some number of militia troops to accompany him. And (probably to his great surprise) there stood Joab, the deposed former commander of David's army! So get the picture: while David had dismissed Joab as his general of the army, Joab didn't leave the army nor apparently did he give up his authority. In fact the troops under his direct command stayed loyal to Joab, probably figuring that (if the past was any indication) this situation was going to be short lived anyway. So now we see that the reason that David sent Amasa scurrying around the countryside of Judah looking to re-form the militia is because it was obvious to David and to Amasa that the professional fighting men of Israel had no interest in serving under Amasa, instead staying loyal to Joab and to Avishai, and if Amasa was to have any army at all it would have to consist of whatever farmers and herders and tradesmen he could round up on short notice.

Joab put on a happy face for Amasa, and behaved as though all was well. And to further put Amasa at ease Joab approached him and asked him, "Is all well with you my brother?" This affectionate greeting would have rung true to **Amasa** as indeed Amasa and Joab were 1st cousins, very close family for that era. And to further disarm Amasa we're told that Joab

reached out and grabbed Amasa's beard and kissed him. The grabbing of the beard was a sure sign of playful friendliness and no doubt the slightly worried Amasa felt much more at ease with such a warm greeting and the manly Middle Eastern traditional kiss on the neck or cheek that accompanied it. But it was actually all a murderous deception that harkens back to earlier times when **Yo'av** then, too, refused to allow any rivals to live.

Thus the narrator tells us that **Yo'av** was in full battle dress and wearing his sword when he greeted **Amasa**; so while at first glance this would have made Amasa wary, Joab's warm and brotherly demeanor calmed his fears. Joab reached out with his right hand (no doubt Joab was right handed) and used that to playfully grab Amasa's beard; and as he did so his sword silently slipped out of its scabbard and fell to the ground. Using his free left hand Joab picked up the sword and quickly jammed it into the lower abdomen of the startled Amasa, essentially disemboweling him. The blow was so swift and on target that **Yo'av** didn't even need to withdraw his sword and thrust it into his cousin a 2nd time. But there was another reason that Yo'av didn't stab him again; he wanted Amasa to live just a little longer. A soldier usually finished off his opponent as a sort of kindness so that the pain and agony didn't linger but Yo'av wanted Amasa to suffer as an example for anyone daring to think he could take Joab's position as 2nd in command of all Israel away from him.

So now things were back to normal; **Yo'av** and his brother **Avishai** were in command of David's forces and they resumed their pursuit of **Sheva**. One of Joab's men yelled out to the militia men that Amasa had brought with him, that whoever was on Joab's side was really on David's side, and so should now follow Joab (as they had intended to follow Amasa). In other words: what happened to Amasa is irrelevant to the military operation. They were never going to be fighting for Amasa per se anyway but rather for their king, David. So since Joab has always been David's general the militia should just continue on as before and consider it as serving their king.

By now Amasa was a gruesome sight; his death pangs left him writhing in his blood and innards in the middle of the road and as the militia approached the sight horrified them. Instinctively they stopped and stared, transfixed and unable to turn their gaze away, and so fear began to overtake them. Not so much because they were concerned for Amasa, but because they could suddenly picture themselves in that same condition as a result of fighting Sheva and his men. One of Joab's men (an experienced professional soldier) instantly understood what was happening and so dragged the corpse well off the road and covered over the body with a cloak so as to avoid a mass panic attack.

The troops now headed towards the far north of the land, among the several fortresses that

were built near Lake **Merom** and finally they tracked **Sheva** to **Abel**, or rather to **Abel-Beth-Ma'acah**. Sheva and apparently a mere handful of men took shelter inside this walled city, no doubt threatening the local residents. **Abel** is Hebrew for brook or stream, so this city was called the House of Ma'acah by the brook. The place is best identified today as being about 12 miles north of the Hulah Lake, just a little east of Tel Dan. We're told that Sheva had traveled through the northern tribal territories (those whom he purported to represent) gathering men for his army of rebellion. It would appear that while he gathered some, it was mostly men of his own family. We are told that the **Berim** joined him. Later these men are referred to as the **Berites** or **Bichrites**. Recall in verse 1 that Sheva is identified as the son of **Bikhri** a Benjamite; thus the terms **Berim**, **Berites**, and **Bichrites** are all variant spellings of Sheva's clan's name, a clan that was likely currently the largest and most influential of the several clans that formed the Tribe of Benjamin.

This fortified city with high defensive walls had to be attacked siege-style, so we're told that Joab's troops began to build an earthen ramp up against the city wall. Our CJB and a few other Bible versions will speak of a moat surrounding the city; the word moat is simply not there in the original, it was added in Medieval times as it was usual to have a moat (a canal filled with water) dug around the walls of a fortress. If anything the city of **Abel Beth-Ma'acah** may have dug a trench at the bottom of the walls to effectively make scaling the walls more difficult, but to characterize it as a moat would be quite a stretch. Once the ramp was built, Joab's troops began bashing the top part of the wall to gain entry.

RE-READ 2ND SAMUEL 20: 14 - end

As the residents of **Abel** began to realize that they would likely die right along with **Sheva** and his men, they decided to take action to prevent it as we're told that suddenly a wise woman appeared on the ramparts and called down for parlay with Joab. This wise woman is in Hebrew called a **chakom ishah** and there is no consensus on what her actual or official role may have been. She probably was not a Prophetess (which was an official role and title), but rather just a woman well known for her wise (if not godly) council and so was held in high esteem by the citizenry.

In any case she calls down to the troops below and asks for Joab. Joab responds in a respectful way to this woman, strongly hinting that he knew of her and that he had unusual respect for her because once he identifies himself she demands to know if he is listening. The word used here for listening is **shama**, from the root word **shema**, and the meaning is to hear and obey. So this isn't an issue of Joab merely being asked if he could discern this woman's voice from atop the wall but rather it is if Joab is ready to seriously consider and do what she

advises.

Verse 18 says that the woman begins her council to Joab by telling him that since time immemorial it has been proverbial that people would journey to this city of **Abel-Beth-Ma'acah** to seek wise council on difficult matters; and the council given was considered as so certain to be correct that once given all debate ended. So the idea is that there was an ancient custom that some of the citizens of this city were of a family or cult that was considered as almost infallible sources of wisdom and advice. So the wise woman's message to Joab is: don't disregard what I'm telling you or you'll be sorry. And Joab didn't seem to reject that notion.

The **chakom ishah** proceeds to tell Joab that this is known as a peaceful city and one that has always been loyal to the king so to attack it is just wrong. Further this is an important "mother" city and to destroy it would be an even greater crime. She adds more drama by saying, "Why swallow up the inheritance of **Yehoveh**"? A mother city means a principle city. The ancient system of urban planning was that you'd have a principle city (usually a walled fortress) and then there would be several nearby villages that depended on the city (and were also usually under the authority of the city's king), and together they formed a community and a local economy. Either formally or informally they also co-operated for the local defense so that attack on one was an attack on all. And in case of attack from a powerful enemy, the local villagers would flee to the mother city where there were walls for protection.

When the wise woman said that Joab was in process of destroying the inheritance of **Yehoveh** she was using Torah terms and it was referring to the Hebrew people who lived there because the Israelite people and the Israelite land are called by God, His inheritance. That's why the Lord protects His people and His land with such fervor; and why it is the utmost folly and offense towards God to stand against His people and/or His land (in ancient or modern times). They are His inheritance, meaning they are His holy property, and you don't mess with God's holy property without severe consequences even if those consequences may not happen immediately.

Therefore Joab reacts to her accusation couched in a question with, "Heaven forbid!" Even the warrior-general Joab, who has just ruthlessly murdered Amasa for nothing more than personal ambition, understands the seriousness of misappropriating or destroying that which belongs to the Lord.

So basically the wise woman is saying to Joab: why didn't you inquire of us first, before you began a siege about whether we were standing with Sheva, or intended to protect him? NOT to do so is a direct violation of Torah Law and that itself brings a punishment by God.

(Deu 20:10-12 CJB)

¹⁰ ***"When you advance on a town to attack it, first offer it terms for peace.***

¹¹ ***If it accepts the terms for peace and opens its gates to you, then all the people there are to be put to forced labor and work for you.***

¹² ***However, if they refuse to make peace with you but prefer to make war against you, you are to put it under siege.***

So Joab says, very well then; if you will just turn **Sheva** over to us we'll leave. The wise woman responded: "All right, his head will be thrown to you over the wall". Negotiations ended and that's what happened; the town's people killed Sheva and gave his head as proof to Joab. Joab identified the head as **Sheva's**, blew the shofar to signal the battle to cease, and everybody went home. This is why I said last week that it's probably a bit too strong to term this episode as a rebellion; in the end, it really didn't amount to much more than one man's crusade against David and he was dispatched in short order not by a soldier but by a group of townspeople led by a woman.

The final few verses of this chapter gives us a listing of David's cabinet as constituted at the time of **Sheva's** revolt. We got a similar list back in chapter 8, from an earlier time of David's reign. And while the list is substantially the same it should not surprise us that there are some additions and subtractions.

In a nutshell, David's inner circle looked like this:

Yo'av was once again the top General of the Army (after he murdered Amasa). He did have some number of professional soldiers that formed a very small standing army, but when any kind of serious threat developed the army had to be conscripted from the Israelite civilians as a militia.

B'nayah commanded a small group of soldiers that was mainly David's palace guard.

Adoram was the Administrator in charge of forced labor used for government projects. The labor force consisted of captured prisoners of war, almost entirely non-Hebrews, but probably a few Israelites as well who had committed some offense against the State. Later it seems that King Solomon routinely began to add Hebrew forced laborers to the pool for his ambitious building projects.

Y'hoshafat was the recorder. In Hebrew his position is called **zakar**, which means to remember. Our CJB says that he was the Secretary of State which I think is quite incorrect; I find no indication that his job was as Israel's chief diplomat. Rather he was more or less the royal historian who oversaw treaties, rulings, and probably the feats of the king for posterity.

Sh'va was the **sopher** (which is often translated as Scribe). He probably created certain legal documents.

Tzadok and Evyatar were the High Priests; meaning that still at this time David maintained (no doubt for political expediency) 2 High Priests. Solomon would remedy this decidedly wrong situation by removing **Evyatar** who was not of the legitimate line of High Priests descending from Aaron.

Finally there is **'Ira** who was David's priest. Early in David's reign he used a son as a family priest; now it was someone else and the fact that 'Ira is called a Yair-ite probably means he was from the area of Gilead. No matter, there is little doubt that this person was NOT a Levite.

It was customary for a king in the Middle East to employ a family priest, just as it was for wealthy and aristocratic families to do the same. However for a King of Israel to do this was a terrible thing. In fact the Rabbis tend to say that the reason that this infamous fact of a family priest is mentioned here is because it is directly related to the famine that comes next in the Scriptures. That is, the Rabbis say that David having this illegitimate family priest had at least as much to do with the famine happening as did the stated cause of Saul's family unjustly killing certain people from the town of Gibeah. In both cases this was divine retribution for

wrong doing by Israel's king.

As we end this chapter it is important to take notice just how corrupted with Canaanite pagan ways David's administration had become, especially as concerned the Priesthood. Not only did he have 2 High Priests but a family priest as well, which meant that David was involved in some kind of unrecorded sacrificial rituals that were completely unauthorized by the Torah.

READ 2ND SAMUEL CHAPTER 21 all

This chapter begins a section of what some scholars call an Appendix to the book of 2nd Samuel. It seems to be a collection of miscellaneous information about David and his administration that didn't neatly fit chronologically anywhere else. So the first thing to understand is that these various happenings are not in chronological order and that they are at the END of the book has nothing to do with WHEN they occurred.

A second important context for studying this chapter is this: especially when we read the part about David's solution for the famine we need to recognize that what we'll see is a mixture of Torah Law, Middle Eastern customs, and pagan superstitions. It is not recognizing this tragic reality that has caused many a Preacher or Bible teacher to fumble around in this chapter, trying to find some loophole or technicality to explain David's actions that many presume to be God's direct instructions to him. Thus many Christian scholars spend a lot of time apologizing for God for what went on here and explaining that as a result of the coming of Messiah, God has changed and would now never in our time order such a course of action.

The first important miscellaneous piece of data from this section of 2nd Samuel is that at some point David dealt with a famine that lasted for 3 consecutive years. This famine undoubtedly occurred fairly early in David's reign. Now we need to understand that to experience a famine means that there was insufficient food for the local population. It does NOT mean that there was NO food; it means that there wasn't enough to go around and that malnutrition would be the result for the poorest, and in the worst cases starvation for some. But nearly inevitably, especially in the area of Canaan, this lack of food had to do with a drought. The only other typical reason (other than drought) for a famine would be pestilence and when that happens it is almost always just for a single season, not even for a full year. So we can safely assume that there was a severe lack of rain and the crops, orchards, and vineyards failed to produce

very well as a result. Further, other parts of the episode support this conclusion of 3 straight years of too little rain.

Now a year of not enough rain was not unusual in Canaan. Even 2 straight years of less than average rainfall was not rare. But after 3 years David decided that this was sufficiently beyond normal that he should approach Yehoveh and inquire if this was merely a normal although challenging climate cycle or if this was a divinely caused calamity. This consultation with the Lord would have been through his High Priests, not direct communication. And the means of communication would either have been lots or the Urim and Thummim stones. David did NOT have direct communication with Yehoveh the way that Moses did.

And YHWH responds that indeed there is a divine cause for the absence of rain; it is because of what Saul and his household did when they put to death the people of Gibeon. So from God's perspective the issue is blood guilt. Holiness is the overriding principle of the Bible, and the underlying characteristic of God. And Numbers 35 tells us that since the land of Canaan was divinely set apart for God's people, and was the exclusive property of God, then the holiness of the land was of paramount concern because God dwelled with His people there. If the land became too defiled, God would not be able to remain among His people. But one of the worst possible defilements of the Promised Land (or any land really) was that caused by innocent human blood being shed upon it. Thus according to the Torah the murderer's sin could not be atoned for by a sacrifice of an innocent animal; rather only the murderer's own guilty life could satisfy the requirement and thus cleanse the polluted land.

This story of Saul and his family unjustifiably killing certain residents of Gibeon is not to be found in our Bibles. In fact the only mention in any record of such a massacre is right here. What is also important to know is that these particular residents of Gibeon who were killed were NOT Hebrews; they were Amorites. These particular Amorites had made a peace treaty with Israel that went all the way back to the days of Joshua; but what complicated the matter is that they made the peace treaty through deceit. Let's go back and read about when this happened.

READ JOSHUA 9:1 -1 18

What makes this so complex is that not only did the Amorites completely misrepresent who

they were, but verse 4 explains that when the Amorites asked for such a treaty Joshua and his elders didn't bother to consult with God about it. In other words, they did NOT go to the High Priest and by means of either lots or Urim and Thummim inquire of God what they ought to do. The end result is that in their own minds making this treaty made good sense, so what could possibly be the harm?

But then they discovered that they had been duped. So, does it matter that the people who pled for the treaty came deceitfully, or are the Israelites stuck with it no matter the circumstances?

Joshua 9:18-21 CJB

18 The people of Isra'el did not attack them, because the leading officials of the community had sworn to them by ADONAI, the God of Isra'el; but all the community grumbled against the leaders.

19 However, the leaders replied to the whole community, "We have sworn to them by ADONAI, the God of Isra'el; so we can't touch them.

20 Here is what we will do to them: we will let them live, so that God's anger will not be on us because of the oath we swore to them.

21 Yes, let them live," the leaders continued, "but let them chop wood and draw water for the whole community."

The bottom line is that since Joshua and the elders had not bothered to consult God, but DID vow an oath of peace in Yehoveh's name, there is no going back on it. This would be what we might call a rash vow, but it is still an official vow nonetheless and barring the Amorites disavowing this oath of peace, or attacking Israel or some such thing, the peace treaty and accompanying vow was permanent and irrevocable. However as a punishment for their deceit Joshua made the Amorites wood choppers and water drawers (forced laborers). As it turned out, doing this effort for the whole community of Israel meant doing it for the Tabernacle. That's right; what should have been a privileged job exclusively performed by sanctified Levites, was now being performed by non-Hebrews at the Tabernacle of God! Wood for the holy Altar fire and living water for ritual purification was being obtained by pagans!

We'll continue this matter next time.