



The Kingdom Divided: War Between the House of David and Saul (2 Sam 3-4)

Notes: Week Two

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other. This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

(3) David Builds His Family in Hebron [3:2-5](#)

[3:2-5](#) Through the use of a genealogical table, the writer demonstrated David's obedience to the Torah mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" (cf. [Gen 1:28](#)).

The writer indicates that David fathered children through six different wives. The Torah implicitly permitted kings to possess more than one wife, though they were not to have "many wives" (cf. [Deut 17:17](#)). Since David was not explicitly condemned for this number of wives, the writer may have considered David to be in compliance with the letter of the Torah in this matter, though he may certainly be viewed as having strayed from the biblical ideal (cf. [1 Tim 3:2](#); [Titus 1:6](#)). The diversity of David's harem suggests that he was deliberately using marriages for political, as well as familial, reasons; he was in fact skillfully consolidating his power base with them. Two of the wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail of Carmel, were from families situated in southern Judah and thus could have played an important role in assuring his regional support.

David's marriage to "Maacah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur" (v. [3](#)) suggests that David established an alliance with a society east of the Jordan and immediately north of Ish-Bosheth's capital city of Mahanaim. The practical effect of such an alliance would be to double the number of potential threats to Ish-Bosheth's territorial claims—now Ish-Bosheth would have to be concerned with a northern ally of David, besides David himself. This added pressure would have helped to destabilize the Saulide regime.

The other wives—Haggith, Abital, and Eglah—are never depicted in biblical narrative as speaking or performing any actions. They are known elsewhere only for the fact that they bore David's children (cf. [1 Chr 3:2-3](#)).

The genealogical list here also serves the practical function of delineating the line of dynastic succession. Thus, Amnon would have been the heir-apparent to the throne, followed by Kileab, Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah, and Ithrean. In the parallel list found in [1 Chr 3:1-3](#), the son of Abigail is called "Daniel," not Kileab. The variation may be due to an alternate appellation for Kileab. It is also possible that Kileab died and so was replaced in the list by a second son born to Abigail while David was still in Hebron. In such a case the surviving offspring might have retained his brother's position in the dynastic succession.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 304-315.

(4) Abner Switches His Loyalty to David [3:6–21](#)

[3:6–11](#) During the two-year conflict “between the house of Saul and the house of David” (v. [6](#)), the real power behind Ish-Bosheth’s claims was his father’s cousin Abner. It was Abner who had initiated his relative’s rise to the throne (cf. [2:8–9](#)), and it was he who sustained it through his military exploits.

However, Abner’s motives for supporting the dynastic claims of this younger member of his clan may have been less than selfless. Perhaps Abner saw in Ish-Bosheth a person who could be manipulated and otherwise controlled, with the result that he himself would be the de facto ruler over Israel. The text’s observation that Abner “had been strengthening his own position in the house of Saul” suggests that he was preparing to usurp his nephew’s throne.

Whether or not Abner was actively plotting to claim the throne of Israel, Ish-Bosheth believed he was and set about identifying “evidence” to prove it. The son of Saul concluded that his older relative had had sexual contact with “Rizpah daughter of Aiah,” (v. [7](#)), a concubine in Saul’s harem. This act, if it had actually occurred, would mean that Abner was exercising a privilege reserved for the king and thus was using that action to proclaim himself king (cf. [2 Sam 16:21–22](#)).

However, the Bible never affirms that Abner had a sexual relationship with Rizpah, only that Ish-Bosheth accused him of it. Abner became “very angry because of what Ish-Bosheth said” (v. [8](#)). His reaction to the king’s allegation suggests that he considered it to be without merit. To have used a royal concubine would have been an “offense”—an act of betrayal; it would be the equivalent of being “on Judah’s side” and—from an ancient Semitic perspective—as despicable as being “a dog’s head.” But Abner considered himself to be “loyal to the house” of Saul as well as “to his family and friends.”

If in fact Abner was telling the truth, then Ish-Bosheth’s apparently unfounded accusation suggests that he possessed the same tendency to misperceive reality that his father had. Like Saul, Ish-Bosheth falsely accused his most loyal and capable soldier of treason.

Ish-Bosheth’s incendiary words against his most crucial supporter spelled the end of Abner’s efforts to maintain the Saulide regime’s grip on power. Ish-Bosheth was exhibiting his father’s insane tendencies, and Abner did not wish to inflict a second Saul on the nation. From now on he would redirect his efforts to “do for David what the LORD promised him” (v. [9](#)). Rather than contest David’s claim for the divine right to rule Israel, he would vigorously support it. Abner would use the resources he possessed to “transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul and establish David’s throne over Israel” (v. [10](#)); he would see to it that David ruled “from Dan” in the far north of the Promised Land “to Beersheba” in the south.

Abner’s exasperated outburst intimidated Ish-Bosheth, who was now deeply “afraid of” (v. [11](#)) his relative. Rather than execute his highest-ranking general for treason, “he was unable [NIV, “did not dare”] to say another word” about the incident. Perhaps the king’s display of weakness and lack of courage in this matter only reinforced Abner’s determination to put a truly fit king on Israel’s throne.

[3:12–14](#) Following the dispute with Ish-Bosheth, Abner began carrying out the terms of his oath. However, the undertaking was a sensitive one and had to be carried out with considerable diplomacy. After all, he had led military campaigns against David’s regime for two years and had killed one of David’s close relatives (cf. [2:23](#)). Rather than approach David directly, therefore, Abner initiated contact by means of “messengers” sent “on his behalf to David” (v. [12](#)). Through these representatives he proposed that David “make an agreement” [lit., “cut a covenant”] with him: David had made and kept agreements with Benjamites before, and apparently Abner had confidence that David would do it again. If David did so, Abner would use his influence to “bring all Israel over to” his former rival.

The proposed accord seemed quite desirable to David, who saw in it the opportunity to accomplish through diplomacy what could not be done through warfare, the voluntary unification of the nation under David's rule. However, David attached one requirement to the agreement. His motivation behind this shrewd request for Michal's return is apparent: by reestablishing the marital link between David and the house of Saul, David was legally repositioning himself back into the house of Saul. Thus, he was legitimizing his claim of being qualified to rule over territories once ruled by Saul.

With Abner's backing, David coordinated his response to Abner with an ultimatum to Ish-Bosheth. In it he demanded that the king of Israel hand over his sister to David, who was in fact his brother-in-law. David reminded Ish-Bosheth that Michal was, after all, David's rightful wife since he had "betrothed" (v. [14](#)) her by paying "the price of a hundred Philistine foreskins" (cf. [1 Sam 18:25-27](#)).

Now the Torah prohibited men from taking back wives they had previously divorced (cf. [Deut 24:1-4](#)). At the same time, the biblical narrator consistently portrayed David as a man obedient to the Torah. Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that David considered himself legally married to Michal since his days in Saul's royal court. Since he had never divorced Michal, her relationship with Paltiel was technically an adulterous one. Thus David's demand to have Michal returned amounted to an act designed to restore a state of righteousness in the land.

[3:15-16](#) Ish-Bosheth, who is portrayed throughout the narratives of chaps. [2-3](#) as a weak and passive figure, did not resist David's demand, perhaps in part because he recognized the sinfulness of his father's actions in separating Michal from David (cf. [1 Sam 25:44](#)).

Ish-Bosheth's order was not without heart-rending consequences. Paltiel, who had cooperated with Saul in depriving David of his rightful wife years before, refused to give her up. Instead, he "went with her, weeping behind her all the way to Bahurim" (v. [16](#)), a village northeast of Jerusalem near the border between Judah and Benjamin. At that point Abner, perhaps accompanied by an armed military contingent, forced Paltiel to "go back home." Reluctantly, Paltiel complied.

[3:17-18](#) Abner's activities on David's behalf took a significant turn when he "conferred with the elders of Israel" (v. [17](#)). Though the "elders" possessed less authority than the king in a monarchical governmental structure, they probably were more esteemed and influential within their respective tribes than the king. It was the tribal elders who had demanded the creation of an Israelite monarchy in the first place (cf. [1 Sam 8:4-5](#)), and support of David would guarantee his recognition as king throughout Israel.

Playing on their anxieties regarding the Philistines and other foreign threats, Abner tactfully nudged the power brokers to [re!]consider anointing David as their king. Surely during the intervening years following Saul's death the other tribal leaders thoughtfully considered the advantages of following the tribe of Judah's lead in making David, the most successful military commander in Israel's history, their king. Abner encouraged them to stop thinking about it and "do it" (v. [18](#)).

Abner bolstered his recommendation with a revelatory word not previously mentioned in 1, 2 Samuel and associated with David. According to Abner, the Lord had "promised David" that he would work through David's life and ministry to rescue Israel from the Philistines and their other enemies. The closest parallel to this is found in [1 Sam 9:16](#), where this prophetic language had applied to Saul. The reference to the Lord's decision to use David as the only human vehicle for achieving the elders' stated objective (cf. [1 Sam 8:20](#)) reinforces the conclusion that the Lord had rejected Saul and selected David as the central human agent responsible for bringing deliverance to Israel.

While the biblical text does not indicate the elders' response to Abner's plea here, it is clear that his words had a positive effect. This same group affirmed David's divine right to rule over them and took part in his anointing (cf. [5:2-3](#)).

3:19–21 In a more general sense “Abner also spoke to the Benjamites in person” (v. [19](#)). A special meeting with this group was crucial, since their acceptance of David as king could be accomplished only when they rejected one of their own. Because Abner was one of the most respected and powerful Benjamites, his support of David would have been critical to the cause of making David king over Benjamin.

The text suggests that Abner scored diplomatic successes in both of his meetings because afterwards he “went to Hebron to tell David everything that Israel and the whole house of Benjamin wanted to do.” Wisely, Abner chose not to enter the territory of Judah without a detachment of “twenty” (v. [20](#)) soldiers; after all, he was the supreme commander of troops officially at war with Judah.

David treated Abner and his men not as enemies but as honored guests at the royal residence and “prepared a feast” for them. Having concluded an upbeat *tête-à-tête* with David, Abner requested permission to complete the transfer of national power into David’s hands. This would be accomplished by calling an all-Israelite assembly so that the nation could “make a compact [lit., “cut a covenant”] with” (v. [21](#)) David. At the proposed convocation David would be given the right to “rule over all that” his “heart desires.”

David wholeheartedly approved of Abner’s plan and sent him away from the southern royal city “in peace.”

(5) Joab Murders Abner [3:22–27](#)

3:22–25 Soon after David successfully concluded the delicate negotiations with Abner (v. [22](#)) at Hebron, the king was greeted with more good news of Joab’s return from a successful raid. The plunder was most appreciated since it funded David’s governmental activities, including the payment of his troops and extending his influence throughout the territory. Since David had no administrative system for gathering income, he continued his earlier practice of conducting raids against Israel’s enemies to create the necessary revenues (cf. [1 Sam 27:8–11](#); [30:26](#)), just as the rival king Ish-Bosheth did (cf. [2 Sam 4:2](#)).

However, when Joab learned of the negotiations with Abner (v. [23](#)), he was livid. Abner was Joab’s most hated enemy, especially because of his role in Asahel’s death (cf. [2:23](#)). Joab did not believe this rival general could be trusted to provide sincere support for David, since Abner was a member of Saul’s family. Furthermore, Abner also was the single greatest threat to Joab’s own position of supreme military leadership; it is almost certain that David would give Abner key military responsibilities in exchange for his help in becoming king over all Israel. As a result, he angrily berated David for letting Abner return unharmed to Benjamite territory. He accused Abner of dishonesty and suggested that the true purpose of his visit was to gain military intelligence (v. [25](#)).

3:26–27 Without waiting for orders from David, Joab left the king’s presence and initiated a secret plan designed to permanently eliminate Abner as a threat. First, he dispatched “messengers after Abner” (v. [26](#)), apparently to tell Abner that David wanted to speak with him further. The messengers met up with the Saulide general less than two miles northwest of Hebron at “the well of Sirah” (modern Ain Sirah[?]). Succeeding in convincing him to return to Hebron, they “brought him back” without David’s knowledge.

Meanwhile, Joab was lurking in the recesses of the fortified gate structure at the entrance to Hebron. As Abner entered the royal city, Joab stepped out and “took him aside into the gateway, as though to speak with him privately” (v. [27](#)). Abner’s guard was down at the time, in part because of the peace agreement

he had just negotiated with David and in part because he was in a city of refuge (cf. [Josh 21:13](#)), where the Torah strictly prohibited vengeful violence (cf. [Num 35:24–25](#)) without due process of law.

There Joab murdered Abner to avenge his brother Asahel. Now the Torah did permit surviving adult males in a murder victim's family to kill the murderer of their kinsman if circumstantial evidence warranted and it could be demonstrated that the killer was motivated by malice aforethought (cf. [Num 35:20–21](#)). But the fact that Abner was fleeing from Asahel when death occurred as well as the fact that the deathblow was administered with the blunt end of a spear suggest that no malice aforethought motivated Abner's actions. Following the Torah-mandated trial (cf. [Num 35:24](#)), Abner probably would have been exonerated and permitted to live out his days in a city of refuge like Hebron ([Num 35:25](#)). Joab's actions against Abner were not only unwarranted but a flagrant violation of God's law.

(6) David Proves His Innocence in Abner's Death [3:28–39](#)

[3:28–39](#) When David heard of this wanton act of violence against Abner (v. [28](#)), as a proper king he was obligated to uphold the Torah guidelines (cf. [Deut 17:18–19](#)), which in this case had clearly been violated. Rather than overlook the actions of his close relative and commanding general, therefore, David distanced himself and the Lord's people from Joab and instead placed a curse on him. Announcing that "I and my kingdom are forever innocent before the LORD concerning the blood of Abner son of Ner," David prayed that Abner's blood might "fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father's house" (v. [29](#)). David then invoked a curse calling for a variety of disasters to inflict Joab's household. The calamities David mentioned—"a running sore or leprosy," having a family member "who leans on a crutch or who falls by the sword or who lacks food"—are essentially a summary of the litany of Torah curses directed against Israelites who violated Yahweh's covenant (cf. [Lev 26:14–39](#); [Deut 28:15–68](#)). On his deathbed David would later cite Joab's murder of Abner as one of two reasons for ordering his general's execution (cf. [1 Kgs 2:5–6](#)).

[3:30–31a](#) Joab properly bore the brunt of responsibility for Abner's death. However, he had not acted alone; "his brother Abishai" assisted in the deed; perhaps Abishai had led the delegation that called Abner back to Hebron. David implicated others—"all the people with" (v. [31](#)) Joab—as accessories in the murder as well.

David then forced all who participated in any manner in Abner's murder to deny their inclination to exult over his death. Instead, they must take the lead in a mournful observance of Abner's death that commemorated him as a national hero. Each co-conspirator had to rip his "clothes and put on sackcloth and walk in mourning in front of" the bier carrying Abner's body.

David had been traumatized by the shocking turn of events that day. It had begun with bright promises for national unity and peace, yet it ended with the threat of deepening national division and conflict; it began with the cementing of a friendship but ended with the burying of a friend. As has been the case throughout history, a despicable deed of personal vengeance put a crimson stain on the fabric of society and threatened to tear it apart.

In the midst of this dark series of events, however, the author subtly encourages the reader not to conclude that the Lord's will for David had been thwarted. For the first time in the biblical narrative—and in the very midst of Abner's funeral procession, at that—the writer calls David "the king" (*Hb. hammelek*) in a nonquotational clause. For the writer—and thus for the astute reader—this tragedy transformed David; it provided a forum in which he could display his truly regal nature, and neither he nor the nation would ever be the same again. To reinforce David's new identity, the writer would refer to David as "the king" five more times in the next seven verses—only twice in those verses does he use David's personal name. Ironically, Abner did bring the kingdom to David.

[3:31b–35](#) David played the most memorable role in Abner’s funeral. Besides walking immediately “behind the bier” (v. [31](#)) of his friend during the procession to the burial site, he “wept aloud at Abner’s tomb” (v. [32](#))—an undignified but deeply touching form of conduct for a king. In addition, David composed and sang a “lament for Abner” (v. [33](#)). The song highlights the heinous circumstances of Abner’s death and vilifies his killers, calling them “wicked men” (v. [34](#)). The power of the king’s impassioned art overwhelmed “all the people,” who “wept over” Abner again.

As if these previous actions on David’s part were not enough, the king also took an oath to fast during the remainder of the daylight hours. Even as Abner’s death had deprived David of the kingdom-sustaining help of his new ally, so it would also deprive him of food, the sustaining strength of his body. This form of self-denial out of respect for a dead opponent was certainly contrary to custom. In spite of the urging of “all the people” (NIV, “all”; v. [35](#)), David refused to “taste bread or anything else” prior to sunset.

[3:36–39](#) David’s sincere yet astute actions did not go unnoticed by “all the people” (v. [36](#))—particularly the northern soldiers who had accompanied Abner on his peace mission to Hebron. David’s respectful treatment of their slain leader, as well as “everything the king did” generally, “pleased them.” As a result they concluded that “the king had no part in the murder of Abner son of Ner” (v. [37](#)).

This conclusion was reinforced by David’s prosaic tribute to Abner in which the king proclaimed him “a prince and a great man” (v. [38](#)). The term translated in the NIV as “prince” (Hb. *śar*) is generally employed in the Hebrew to indicate an appointed leader, especially a military commander (cf. [4:2](#); [1 Sam 17:18](#))—not a direct descendant of the king.

David also contrasted his style of leadership as Israel’s “anointed king” with that of Joab and Abishai, the “sons of Zeruiah” (v. [39](#)). Whereas they were rash and rough (NIV, “strong”), David was sensitive and restrained (NIV, “weak”). He explicitly rejected their approach as being excessive. No doubt David’s comments were meant to reassure the Israelites who had not yet accepted him as their king that he would avoid a bloody purge of those who had resisted his claim of sovereignty over all Israel.

(7) Recab and Baanah Murder Ish-Bosheth [4:1–7](#)

[4:1–3](#) The death of Abner meant the end of Ish-Bosheth’s ability to retain the throne of Israel. Now no effective military opposition could be mounted against David’s forces in the battle for control of the northern tribal areas. Furthermore, without Abner, Ish-Bosheth would be unable to fulfill the primary mandate Israel’s elders had placed on their king; he could no longer go out before Israel and fight their battles (cf. [1 Sam 8:20](#)). As a result, “all Israel became alarmed” (v. [1](#)).

In this moment of vulnerability, Recab and Baanah, two of Ish-Bosheth’s lesser military commanders, decided to use the king’s reversal of fortunes to their advantage. Their responsibilities as “leaders of raiding bands” (v. [2](#)) in Ish-Bosheth’s army probably were identical to that of Joab’s in David’s army (cf. [3:22](#))—to fund the Israelite government by plundering nearby foreign settlements.

These two Benjamites had originated from Beeroth (modern Khirbet el-Burj?), a former Gibeonite settlement located approximately four miles northwest of Jerusalem. They were descended from a family of Benjamites that had helped resettle Beeroth (cf. [Josh 9:16–18](#)) after the original inhabitants were forced to move to Gittaim, a less desirable location.

[4:4](#) The most important event of chap. [4](#) is the death of Ish-Bosheth. But in order to dispel the notion that might arise in the reader’s mind that Ish-Bosheth’s death meant the final destruction of the Saulide family, the writer inserts here a note concerning Mephibosheth, son of “Jonathan son of Saul.” When

Mephibosheth, known outside of 2 Samuel as Merib-Baal (cf. [1 Chr 8:34](#); [9:40](#)), was “five years old,” his father died (cf. [1 Sam 31:2](#)) on the battlefield. In the ensuing chaos of a hasty flight from Philistines at the royal palace in Gibeah, Mephibosheth was inadvertently dropped by “his nurse,” so that he “became crippled.” The resulting permanent disability would play a role later in shaping the events of 2 Samuel (cf. [9:1–13](#); [16:1–4](#); [19:24–30](#)).

[4:5–7](#) Recab and Baanah returned to Ish-Bosheth’s royal residence in Mahanaim. Entering the residence unhindered under the premise they were getting “some wheat” (v. [6](#)) from an interior storeroom, they entered Ish-Bosheth’s bedroom instead. Once there they “stabbed him in the stomach” and then “cut off his head” (v. [7](#)), a pair of actions designed not only to produce a quick and certain death but also to provide proof of the monarch’s death. The circumstances of Ish-Bosheth’s death are highlighted by repeating them with expansions in v. [7](#).

With their gruesome trophy in hand, Recab and Baanah “traveled all night by way of the Arabah” (v. [7](#)), a desolate pathway extending south from Mahanaim in the Jordan rift valley north of the Dead Sea. The men’s timing and route permitted them to avoid detection by forces loyal to the house of Saul and at the same time arrive in Hebron as quickly as possible.

(8) David Executes Ish-Bosheth’s Murderers [4:8–12](#)

[4:8](#) When Recab and Baanah reached Hebron, they went with pride straight “to David” with “the head of Ish-Bosheth.” The men showed no signs of remorse for their murderous deed and apparently believed that they were serving as the Lord’s agents of divine vengeance “against Saul and his offspring.” Whatever their thinking may have been, they were crediting God with what was in fact a vile, sinful deed. No doubt they believed that a handsome reward awaited them for their success in eliminating this rival claimant to Israel’s throne.

[4:9–11](#) But the men’s confident expectations were not based on an accurate understanding of David’s respect for Saul and his family (cf. [1 Sam 24:12](#); [26:9–11](#); [2 Sam 1:14–16](#)) or his commitment to the royal responsibility of upholding the teachings of the Torah (cf. [Deut 17:19](#)). Rather than commending and rewarding the men, David obligated himself by an oath in the Lord’s name to “demand” their lives in punishment for their murder of Ish-Bosheth (v. [11](#)).

David’s decision to put the murderers to death was consistent with his previous treatment of the Amalekite who had sought an audience with David “in Ziklag” (v. [10](#)) to announce his role in killing Saul (cf. [1:14–16](#)). It was also consistent with Torah demands regarding “wicked men” who “have killed an innocent man in his own house and on his own bed” (cf. [Gen 9:6](#); [Exod 21:12](#); [Lev 24:17](#); [Num 35:31](#)).

David did not want the help of murderous conspirators in furthering his career. Instead, he desired a career that was conceived and perfected by “the LORD” who “lives” (v. [9](#)). In the past it was the Lord who had “delivered” David “out of all trouble,” and David would now rely on the Lord—not Recab and Baanah—to bring him to an even higher level of success.

[4:12](#) David had rendered his judgment on Recab and Baanah; now it was time to act. To express the fact that Recab and Baanah died under a divine curse (cf. [Deut 21:22–23](#)), David had his men “cut off their hands and feet” and then hang “the bodies by the pool in Hebron.” By contrast, David showed respect for his murdered brother-in-law by burying Ish-Bosheth’s head “in Abner’s tomb at Hebron.”