



God's Promise to David: The Lord Himself will Establish a House (2 Sam 9-10)

Notes: Week Five

***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

(10) David Fulfills His Commitment to Jonathan [9:1-13](#)

In this chapter David fulfills the pledge of familial support he made to Saul as well as to Jonathan son of Saul (cf. [1 Sam 18:3](#); [20:42](#); [23:18](#); [24:21-22](#)), the one initially positioned in the Saulide dynasty as David's chief challenger for Israel's throne. Through this narrative the biblical writer portrays David as the supreme Israelite example of covenant faithfulness (Hb. *hesed*), the highest virtue in Hebrew society. Judged by David's own demanding criteria (cf. [Ps 15:1, 4](#)), the king proved himself worthy to live on the Lord's holy hill by keeping his oath to Jonathan even though it ran the risk of hurting his own dynasty.

[9:1-3](#) Established on the throne in Jerusalem after having effectively put down both internal and external opposition, David was now in a position to fulfill his commitment to "the house of Saul" (v. [1](#)). Accordingly, at an unknown point in time but perhaps before the events of [2 Sam 21:1-10](#) (cf. esp. [21:7](#)), he began a search for someone to whom he could "show kindness for Jonathan's sake." Ziba, a well-to-do (cf. v. [10](#)) "servant of Saul's household" (v. [2](#)) who apparently managed the former king's royal estate, was called in and questioned by the king.

The narrator's seemingly unnecessary repetition of David's question in v. [3](#) (cf. v. [1](#)) is in fact significant in establishing the theme of this chapter. It underscores that David was not an enemy of "the house of Saul" (v. [3](#)); in fact, he was an agent of "God's kindness" (Hb. *hesed*; "loving faithfulness") working to benefit Israel's former dynastic family.

[9:4-10](#) Through his inquiry David learned that there was "still a son of Jonathan" (v. [4](#)) apparently living with a wife and son (cf. v. [12](#)) in a self-imposed internal exile "at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar." Makir, mentioned here for the first time, was a wealthy and powerful individual living east of the Jordan at Lo Debar (modern Umm ed-Debar?) in the Jordan river valley of Gilead. Later he proved to be one of David's most loyal supporters (cf. [17:27-29](#)).

Mephibosheth, known outside of 2 Samuel as Merib-Baal (cf. [1 Chr 8:34](#); [9:40](#)), was "crippled in both feet" (v. [3](#)) as a result of an accident in early childhood (cf. [4:4](#)). David summoned him for appearance at the royal court. Appropriately—and perhaps somewhat awkwardly—the lame young man "bowed down" before the king "to pay him honor" (v. [6](#)).

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 352-360.

Using a dialogic script reflective of an interchange between a social superior and an inferior (cf. [1 Sam 3:9](#)), David called out Mephibosheth's name; in turn, Mephibosheth referred to himself as "your servant." After establishing the sociological parameters of this relationship by giving the proper initial exchange, David issued a magnanimous decree that changed Mephibosheth's fortunes forever. First, David restored to the disfigured, exiled Saulide "all the land that belonged to ... Saul" (v. [7](#)). This would have meant that the family estate located about three miles north of Jerusalem in Gibeah would be returned to Mephibosheth. Second, David gave Mephibosheth a privilege that seemed to have perished the day his father Jonathan had died, the right to board at the king's table "always." Saul had accorded David this dispensation during his youth (cf. [1 Sam 20:5](#)); now David returned the favor. Third, David provided Mephibosheth with a large contingent of servants and material wealth. He ordered "Ziba, Saul's servant" (v. [9](#)) along with his "fifteen sons and twenty servants" (v. [10](#)), "to farm the land" that had originally belonged to Saul "and bring in the crops" for Mephibosheth so that Jonathan's son "may be provided for."

Mephibosheth's response to the king's magnanimous pronouncements was one of abject humility (cf. [2 Sam 7:18](#)). After bowing down once again before David, he called himself "your slave" (v. [8](#); NIV, "servant"; Hb. *'ebed*) and "a dead dog" (cf. [1 Sam 24:14](#)).

9:11–13 Ziba, whose destiny had also been changed by the king's imperial edict, had no choice but to accept the new assignment—and this he did. However, when the opportunity presented itself, Ziba apparently tried to manipulate David to issue a different, more favorable edict (cf. [16:2–4](#)).

Mephibosheth—and presumably his entire family, including "a young son named Mica" (v. [12](#))—was permanently relocated back in Benjamite territory "in Jerusalem" (v. [13](#)). There Mephibosheth "always ate at the king's table" even though "he was crippled in both feet." David's acceptance of a lame man in his house confirms that the royal pronouncement banning "the lame" in the royal residence was intended as a figurative reference to an ethnic group, not mobility-impaired individuals (cf. comments at [5:8](#)).

(11) David Conquers an Ammonite-Led Coalition [10:1–19](#)

The present story serves as a significant foil to the previous episode. In both narratives David is shown expressing compassion and generosity toward individuals from the region of Gilead whose royal forebears had recently died. David's desire to bless both sons of the covenant, exemplified by Mephibosheth, as well as those outside the covenant circle, exemplified by Hanun, is evident here. Hanun's reactions to David's acts—which differ significantly from those of Mephibosheth—go far to throw favorable light on Mephibosheth.

King David's deep concern for the interests and concerns of his soldiers, as well as his military brilliance both tactically and in the heat of battle, are displayed in this chapter. The biblical writer portrays David here as a man who was willing to put significant national resources at risk in order to uphold justice (cf. [8:15](#)).

David's continuing interaction with Aramean city-states also is portrayed in this chapter. Perhaps his interest in these national groups (cf. [8:3–14](#)) was due in part to the fact that much revenue could be earned from controlling the international trade routes that ran through the region.

At the same time, this chapter provides a historical context for the events of chaps. [11–12](#). In concert with [12:26–31](#), this section frames, and thus highlights, the significance of David's sin and resulting judgment.

[10:1–2a](#) “After this” (v. [1](#); NIV, “In the course of time”)—that is, after David had fulfilled his commitment to Jonathan—Nahash “the king of the Ammonites died.” Israel had previously defeated Nahash in battle (cf. [1 Sam 11:1–11](#)), and David had apparently maintained a peace treaty with the Ammonites that recognized Israel as the superior party.

Out of proper respect for the passing of a head of state with whom he had established a treaty, “David sent a delegation to express his sympathy to Hanun” (v. [2](#)), Nahash’s son and successor. At the same time, David took steps to “show kindness to Hanun son of Nahash” and thereby confirm the continuance of favorable relations between the nations.

[10:2b–5](#) David’s honorable intentions in sending the delegation to Rabbah Ammon were either misunderstood or cunningly rebuffed by the “military leaders [lit., “princes”] of the sons of Ammon” (v. [3](#); NIV, “Ammonite nobles”). This group of influential men convinced the new Ammonite king that David had sent the diplomatic entourage with ulterior, hostile motives.

Hanun believed the paranoid (or sinister?) report that came to him and acted accordingly. Rather than treating David’s men with great respect as representatives of a superior party in a covenant treaty, he humiliated them egregiously and sent them back. Hanun’s treatment of the men would have desecrated the men’s bodies, their clothes, and their national mission.

Except for the performance of certain religious rituals (cf. [Lev 14:9](#); [Num 6:18](#); [Ezek 5:1](#)) or to express profound emotional distress (cf. [Ezra 9:3](#)), Israelite men always wore beards. To remove an Israelite male’s beard forcibly was to force him to violate the Torah (cf. [Lev 19:27](#)) and to show contempt for him personally (cf. [Isa 50:6](#)).

Likewise, the removal of the extremities of a garment made that garment unacceptable by Torah standards (cf. [Num 15:38](#); [Deut 22:12](#)) and had the effect of symbolically desecrating the law itself (cf. [Num 15:39](#)). Of course, the Ammonites’ actions also dishonored the Israelite men by forcibly exposing their genitals to public view, a humiliating experience to men of that culture.

When David learned of the Ammonites’ outrageous actions, he acted as a good shepherd of the Lord’s flock, ministering first to the needs of his victimized men before tending to the Ammonites. He ordered the delegation to “stay at Jericho,” the first Israelite settlement west of the Jordan on the main road back to Jerusalem, until their beards had grown back. This decree permitted the men to avoid multiplying their humiliation by having to appear in disgrace before their families and at the royal court in Jerusalem.

[10:6–8](#) The Ammonites no doubt calculated that their provocative actions would cause them to “become a stench in David’s nostrils” (v. [6](#))—and their reasonings proved correct. Perhaps Hanun and his men had deliberately created an incident in order to break free of treaty obligations established between David and his father Nahash. In anticipation of an armed response from David, they hired an army of mercenaries from Beth Rehob, Zobah, Maacah, and Tob. These Aramean city-states, all regions north and east of the Sea of Galilee, were as much as 110 miles north of Rabbah Ammon. The hired forces would have traveled down the King’s Highway to journey to Rabbah Amman and encounter the Israelite army. According to [1 Chr 19:6](#), Hanun paid one thousand talents (approx. 75,000 pounds) of silver to gain the services of these Arameans. The practice of employing a mercenary force against enemies who were perceived to be superior was common in the ancient Near East; Israelites did this on numerous occasions throughout the royal period (cf. [1 Kgs 15:18–20](#); [2 Kgs 16:8–9](#); [2 Chr 25:5–6](#)).

David learned of the menacing military activity in the vicinity of Aram, perhaps from the Israelite garrisons situated in the district of Damascus (cf. [8:14](#)), who may have observed Ammonite caravans transporting silver. Taking the threat extremely seriously, he responded by sending Joab out with the Israelite army (v. [7](#)).

David's forces under Joab crossed the Jordan river near Jericho, then pushed eastward and northward up toward Rabbah Ammon. An unexpected and dangerous military situation awaited the Israelites as they approached the vicinity of Ammon. Instead of a massive group of Arameans still north of them, about to join forces with the Ammonites at Rabbah, they found that the Arameans had arrived early and actually moved their forces some twenty miles south of Rabbah to Medeba (modern Madeba; cf. [1 Chr 19:7](#)).

Now the entire Israelite army was trapped between two formidable armies. "The Ammonites came out and drew up in battle formation at the entrance to their city gate" (v. [8](#)), while the chariot-led (cf. [1 Chr 19:6](#)) Aramean armies were poised to attack the Israelites from the rear.

[10:9–12](#) When Joab became aware of the enemy's brilliant tactic of putting "battle lines in front of him and behind him" (v. [9](#)), he was compelled to improvise a strategy that would permit him to deal with both threats simultaneously. His plan was to divide the Israelite troops, putting the most capable general and most "of the best troops in Israel" up against the greatest threat, while directing the remainder of the force against the weaker enemy. Joab himself took command of the elite Israelite force "and deployed them against the Arameans." He gave command of the second force to his brother Abishai with the understanding that if the Arameans proved to be "too strong for" (v. [11](#)) Joab's forces, or if the Ammonites were "too strong for" Abishai's forces, then the two contingents would reunite and face the most immediate threat together.

Joab's plan was risky at best, and all involved knew it. Nevertheless, it seemed to be the best way to cope with the nasty surprise that had greeted Israel east of the Jordan. Accordingly Joab encouraged the troops to do three things: first, to "be strong" (v. [12](#))—that is, to utilize every personal resource at their disposal. Second, he urged them to "fight bravely for our people"—that is, to remember that their efforts on the battlefield would directly impact their families and the rest of Israel. Third, he encouraged them to fight bravely for "the cities of our God"—that is, to fight in defense of the Lord's possessions, in this case the Promised Land and its cities.

Joab's third statement to the troops suggests that for him this battle was ultimately a religious conflict; it was a tangible expression of Israel's commitment to the Lord. So far the Ammonites had desecrated the Lord's people by their shameful treatment of the official delegation; however, if the Israelite troops failed to achieve a victory here, the Ammonites would be free to invade and desecrate the Lord's land, thus doing immeasurably more harm.

Joab concluded his prebattle statements by encouraging the Israelites to remember that the battle belonged to the Lord (cf. [1 Sam 17:47](#); [2 Chr 20:15](#)). Over and above the Ammonites, the Arameans, and the Israelites stood the Lord, and he could be counted on to "do what is good in his sight."

[10:13–14](#) After the strategy was devised and the troops properly encouraged, Joab's forces attacked the Arameans, who "fled before him." The Israelites' success against the Aramean forces portended disaster for the Ammonites, who had been closely monitoring the Arameans' battlefield fortunes. Realizing that their hopes of a decisive victory against the Israelites were dashed that day, "they went inside" (v. [14](#)) the fortress city of Rabbah to avoid a similar defeat.

The Israelites, who had not wanted to fight the Ammonites in the first place, made no effort to lay siege to Rabbah at this time; that challenge would await another day (cf. [11:1](#)). Instead, Joab ordered the troops to withdraw and returned to Jerusalem.

[10:15–19](#) The Arameans probably feared military reprisals from David for their role in the failed Ammonite attempt. In an effort to deal with this predictable Israelite response, the Aramean coalition “regrouped” to mount a preemptive military strike. For this second operation Hadadezer, the previously conquered king of Zobah (cf. [8:5](#)), bolstered the regional troops with “Arameans brought from beyond the River” (v. [16](#)) Euphrates.

David’s intelligence network in Aram again warned the king of this new threat. David responded appropriately by taking his army across the Jordan to Helam (v. [17](#); modern `Alma[?]), a site slightly more than thirty miles east of the Sea of Galilee.

At that location he was met by a vast force of chariots and foot soldiers. However, once again the Arameans’ best efforts against the Israelites proved futile. In the end “they fled before Israel” (v. [17](#)) and suffered massive casualties: “David killed seven hundred of their charioteers and forty thousand of their foot soldiers” (v. [18](#)). In addition, “he also struck down Shobach [or Shophach; cf. [1 Chr 19:16](#)] the commander” of the multinational force so that “he died there.”

David’s apparently unsought victories against the Aramean coalition had the desirable effect of greatly expanding Israel’s influence over the territories north of Damascus, thus helping them fulfill the Torah promise first given to Abraham (cf. [Gen 15:18](#)). The vassal states previously controlled by Hadadezer of Zobah “made peace with the Israelites and became subject to them.” This gave David an additional source of revenue, as well as strengthened control over both the Via Maris and the King’s Highway, the two most important international roads of that region.

David’s influence over the Arameans forced these kingdoms to cancel the mutual-assistance treaties they had previously established with the Ammonites; they now became “afraid to help the Ammonites anymore.”