



The Guilt of Sin: David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 15-16) *Notes: Week Eight*

***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

(8) Absalom Leads a Treasonous Revolt Against David [15:1-12](#)

[15:1](#) Having been restored to a position of prominence in the royal city and household, Absalom began to assert his lofty ambitions. First of all, he acquired his own personal chariot and horses, thereby becoming the first Israelite specifically mentioned in the biblical text to do so. The prophet Samuel had stated that Israel's kings would someday use chariots and horses ([1 Sam 8:11](#)), though neither king Saul nor king David were portrayed in the biblical narratives as using them. However, each of the three sons of David who claimed kingship for himself acquired a chariot and horses (cf. [1 Kgs 1:5](#); [4:26](#)). Absalom's acquisition of these highly visible symbols of royalty in the present narrative already foreshadows a treasonous rebellion against David.

The biblical narratives stretching from Exodus through this point in 2 Samuel are surprisingly negative in their portrayal of horses and chariots. The texts consistently depict only enemies of the Lord and his covenant people as having them. The Egyptians (cf. [Exod 14:9-15:21](#); [Deut 11:4](#); [Josh 24:6](#)), northern Canaanites ([Josh 11:4-9](#); [Judg 4:15](#); [5:19-22](#)), and Arameans ([8:4](#); [10:18](#)) all used them unsuccessfully in battle against Israel. Thus, when Absalom linked them with himself, he was joining his ambitions with symbols of hostility against the Lord and Israel, and with ultimate failure.

In addition to the chariot and horses, Absalom employed "fifty men to run ahead of him." This contingent of young men—likely soldiers—added to his impressive presence wherever he went. Samuel had pessimistically indicated that Israel's kings would someday press young men into service in the way that Absalom did here (cf. [1 Sam 8:11](#); also [1 Kgs 1:5](#)).

[15:2-4](#) Since the time of Moses, a major function of Israel's highest-ranking leaders was to administer divine justice for the Lord's people (cf. [Exod 18:13-16](#); [Judg 4:4-5](#); [1 Sam 8:5](#); [1 Kgs 3:16-28](#); [7:7](#)). Without yet declaring himself king, Absalom began carrying out this executive responsibility as though he were king. Shrewdly, "he would get up early" (v. [2](#))—that is, before sunrise—"and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate" of Jerusalem, perhaps at a threshing floor (cf. [1 Kgs 22:10](#)). By being stationed there even before the time of the morning sacrifice, Absalom was able to intercept all citizens seeking justice from David's court.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 394-410.

Absalom displayed consummate social and political acumen in his interactions with Israel's citizens. Before providing them any judicial services, he first of all expressed a personal interest in each person who had journeyed to the City of David. By first asking them "what town" they had come from, he made the people feel like he cared for them as individuals.

After listening to their concerns Absalom would support them in their case by telling them that their "claims are valid and proper" (v. [3](#)). The same duplicity which had served Absalom so well in the past (cf. [1 Sam 13:24–27](#)), was surely at work here, for at least some of the complaints that came before him must have been without merit.

Absalom also furthered his personal ambitions by fostering a sense of alienation between David's regime and the citizens who sought the king's help. By telling each distraught person he encountered that "there is no representative of the king to hear" their case, he created the false impression that David was neglecting a fundamental royal responsibility. By nurturing the impression that David was derelict in his duty, Absalom succeeded in creating an atmosphere of political discontent among the citizenry of the various tribes.

After creating a positive impression of himself and then alienating the Israelites from David, Absalom hinted that he would like to be given more authority in Israel. However, he wisely avoided openly expressing his desire to depose David and become Israel's next king—that would be treason: instead, he communicated the innocuous wish to be "appointed judge in the land" (v. [4](#)).

[15:5–6](#) Absalom's persuasive skills were not limited to his speech. "Whenever anyone approached him to bow down before him" (v. [5](#)), Absalom would "take hold of him," thus preventing them from completing their act. In a sense, it was appropriate that Absalom stop them, since he was not truly a king and therefore should not be treated like one. However, once again it was Absalom's cunning duplicity, not his virtuous humility, that motivated him to act in this way.

After refusing to accept the respect normally accorded royalty, Absalom then displayed toward each person a sign of great respect and acceptance by kissing them. For many, this action by one who played the role of an empathetic, humble, and justice-minded monarch so convincingly, must have cemented their conviction that he, not David, deserved to be Israel's king. Thus he must have directly influenced hundreds—if not thousands—of individuals from all over Israel to support enthusiastically his bid for kingship. Indeed, before long "he stole the hearts of the men of Israel."

[15:7–9](#) Absalom's practice of administering justice at the city gate was apparently carried out consistently for a period "of four years" (v. [7](#)). After that time Absalom entered a new phase in his scheme to supplant David as Israel's king. Cunningly, he asked David for permission to "go to Hebron"—the same city in which David had been anointed as king over Judah (cf. [2:3–4](#))—in order to "fulfill a vow" he "made to the LORD." The vow reverberated with piety: "If the LORD takes me back to Jerusalem, I will worship the LORD in Hebron" (v. [8](#)).

However, the fact that Absalom waited four years to fulfill the vow takes some of the luster off his halo. Since the Torah required vows to be fulfilled quickly (cf. [Deut 23:21](#)), Absalom's slackness in this matter should have raised questions about his true devotion to the Lord. To the wary, this unusual delay might also have raised doubts regarding Absalom's true motives.

But if David had any misgivings regarding Absalom's request, he did not express them. Since Hebron was also the city of Absalom's birth ([3:2–3](#)) and a significant religious center in Judah (cf. [Josh 21:11–13](#)), the request must not have seemed unreasonable to David. Besides, if he prohibited Absalom from fulfilling a sacred vow, he himself might have to bear the responsibility for forcing his son to disobey the Torah (cf. [Num 30:2](#)). Thus, Absalom "went to Hebron."

[15:10–12](#) At Hebron Absalom found himself twenty miles away from his father and protected by strong walls. From this relatively safe base of operations Absalom moved quickly to usurp David’s throne. He prepared for the public phase of his plot by sending “secret messengers throughout the tribes of Israel” (v. [10](#)) to make a coordinated proclamation throughout the land. Once in place, they were to await “the sound of trumpets” and then announce simultaneously that “Absalom is king in Hebron.” Implicit in this proclamation was a call to arms for those who supported Absalom in his efforts.

One of the most brilliant aspects of Absalom’s plot to overthrow his father may have been his success in emptying Jerusalem of some of its most valuable administrators at the very time when David needed them most. “Two hundred men from Jerusalem had accompanied Absalom to Hebron” (v. [11](#)). Each one had been hand-picked by Absalom and had come “quite innocently,” being only “invited guests.” Once inside the walls of Hebron, however, they became his hostages. Because these two hundred men were unable to assist David in his efforts to respond to the national emergency, the king was put at a severe disadvantage from the very beginning. Furthermore, if any of the two hundred men openly expressed support for David while in Hebron, they risked being killed.

Absalom’s rebellion gained a powerful ally when “Ahithophel the Gilonite, David’s counselor” (v. [12](#)), switched allegiances and joined the traitor in Hebron. The narrator does not state why one of David’s most valued administrators abandoned him; however, the fact that David had had unlawful sexual relations with Ahithophel’s granddaughter and murdered her husband, Uriah, (cf. [11:3](#); [23:34](#)) may have played a role in the decision. Other unnamed individuals also joined Absalom at Hebron, so that his “following kept on increasing” and “the conspiracy gained strength.”

(9) David Goes into Exile Beyond the Jordan River [15:13–17:29](#)

[15:13–15](#) Belatedly, David learned from an unnamed messenger that a coup was underway and “the hearts of the men of Israel [were] with Absalom” (v. [13](#)). The “men of Israel” likely referred to the nation’s armed forces (cf. [Judg 7:23](#); [9:55](#); [20:11](#), [17](#), [20](#); [1 Sam 7:11](#); [14:24](#)). Immediately the king recognized the gravity of the situation and realized he was facing a crisis unlike any other he had faced. Thanks to Absalom’s popular support, as well as his success in taking most of David’s administration hostage, David was unable to mount a credible response. Now for the first time in the biblical account David, the brilliant military leader, ordered those under his command to “flee” (v. [14](#)). Without an immediate departure from Jerusalem, the king feared that they would perish. His analysis of the situation probably was correct.

David’s servants who had been in Jerusalem when news of the coup reached the king remained steadfast in their support for him. Trusting David implicitly, they indicated they were “ready to do whatever ... the king chooses” (v. [15](#)).

[15:16–18](#) Affirmed by this endorsement, David hastily organized these loyal followers in an effort to accomplish two all-important objectives: preserve the life of the king and key members of the royal family and administration and make provisions for the maintenance of the City of David in the king’s absence.

The first objective was accomplished by having David, “with his entire household following him” (v. [16](#)), make a hasty eastward departure from Jerusalem. Though at that moment David was not sure exactly where he was going (cf. v. [20](#)), he had the group set out in the opposite direction from Hebron to increase the distance between themselves and those who were seeking the king’s life. David led the group out of Jerusalem to “a place some distance away” (v. [17](#)), at which point he stopped to organize the group more effectively for military action. At that staging area the king had “all his men,” including “all the Kerethites and Pelethites, and all six hundred Gittites who had accompanied him from Gath” (v.

[18](#)), march past him. The effect of this maneuver was no doubt to increase the level of protection that would be afforded David and the other members of the royal household during their movement down the road.

The second objective was accomplished by establishing a small group of expendable, nonmilitary personnel who would manage the royal residence in Jerusalem. This group was not responsible for the defense of Israel's capital, only its basic continuance. Lest there be any doubt that David did not wish any fighting to take place around the heavily fortified and almost invincible city, David ordered women—"ten concubines" (v. [16](#)) from his harem—to be in charge of the city. Jerusalem was to be a city of peace (cf. [Ps 122:6–9](#)), so only individuals excluded from active participation in military conflict would be permitted to preserve David's interests in the city.

[15:19–22](#) While reorganizing his military forces outside Jerusalem, David seems to have had some second thoughts about the makeup and size of the forces that would accompany him. Apparently he had some serious questions about the loyalty of the Philistine forces led by "Ittai the Gittite" (v. [19](#)). After all, the Philistines previously had waged war against David (cf. [5:17–25](#); [8:12](#)); their political leaders probably would have rewarded Ittai gladly if he betrayed and killed David.

David was certainly aware that foreign forces sometimes switched loyalties in the heat of battle (cf. [1 Sam 14:21](#)); he himself had once been sent away from a military confrontation for fear that he would do the same (cf. [1 Sam 29:4–7](#)). Knowing that such a change in loyalties would only compound his woes, David ordered Ittai and his forces to "go back and stay with King Absalom." It seems strange that David would use the title "king" with reference to Absalom; perhaps, as Gordon suggests, it was a test. If Ittai obeyed the king's command, he would go with the king's blessing.

However, Ittai confounded David by rejecting the king's command. Instead, he bound himself with a loyalty oath sworn on the lives of both Yahweh and David. In a commitment rivaling that of Ruth toward Naomi (cf. [Ruth 1:16–17](#)), Ittai indicated that "wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be" (v. [21](#)). Taking the Philistine general at his word, David reversed his decision and ordered Ittai to "march on" (v. [22](#)) with his own forces "and the families that were with him."

[15:23](#) David was a king without a capital city, but he was not without supportive citizens: "the whole countryside wept aloud as all" David's retinue "passed by." Moving down the hill east of Jerusalem, the group "crossed the Kidron Valley" and then "moved on toward the desert" in the direction of Jericho.

[15:24–26](#) A major portion of David's support at this time came from the religious community. David had consistently provided support for Levites in the past ([1 Sam 22:20–23](#)) and had given them a position of prominence in the royal city and his own administration (cf. [6:12–18](#); [8:17](#)). Now in his own hour of need "Zadok was there" (v. [24](#)), accompanied by "all the Levites, who were with him."

In the hastily arranged royal flight from Jerusalem the Levites were "carrying the ark of the covenant of God." David previously had been responsible for the entrance of the ark into Jerusalem ([6:1–18](#)). He apparently had undertaken this act because of the belief that he was fulfilling a Torah prophecy (cf. [Deut 12:5](#)): the Lord had chosen Jerusalem as the place where he would cause his name to rest (cf. [1 Kgs 8:29](#); [11:36](#); [2 Kgs 23:27](#)).

Yet now it seemed as if David would be responsible for the departure of the ark—God's very throne—from the home the Lord had chosen for himself. David deemed this utterly unacceptable, for it would mean the undoing of a sacred Torah promise-fulfillment. Accordingly, the king ordered Zadok to "take the ark of God back into the city" (v. [25](#)). Zadok and the Levites apparently had carried the ark of the covenant in exile in order to buttress David's claim to the throne: David's possession of the ark would

demonstrate that he alone possessed the divine favor necessary to rule Israel fitly. David, however, rejected this line of reasoning: the ark would not be used as a talisman or as a means of coercing the Lord to favor David. If the king “found favor in the LORD’s eyes,” then the Lord would bring him back and let him “see it and his dwelling place again.” If the Lord were not pleased with David, then “let him do to me whatever seems good to him” (v. [26](#)). This response lays bare David’s heart for God and models a degree of submission to God’s will appropriate for all leaders of God’s people.

As David and his group of supporters were leaving Jerusalem, Abiathar “offered sacrifices” (v. [24](#)). These sacrifices probably were the usual morning offerings (cf. [Num 28:2–4](#)), though they could have been a special offering made to seek the Lord’s favor in the matter of David’s flight.

[15:27–29](#) Besides ordering the return of the ark of the covenant, David ordered Zadok, whom David also recognized as “a seer,” to “go back to the city in peace, with your son Ahimaaz and Jonathan son of Abiathar.” Since these three men were Kohathite priests in Aaron’s family line (cf. [1 Chr 6:2–8](#); [24:6](#)), and therefore charged with caring for the ark of the covenant (cf. [Num 4:4–6](#)), it was fitting that they go wherever the ark went.

But David had a second reason for requiring these priests to return to Jerusalem: they would serve as spies, secretly providing David with vital intelligence regarding Absalom’s plans and movements. As David planned it, he and his entourage would “wait at the fords in the desert” (v. [28](#)) near Jericho for information regarding Absalom’s strategy. “Zadok and Abiathar” agreed to the plan and returned with the ark.

[15:30](#) Ascending out the Kidron Valley—a location that later played a significant role in the life of David’s descendant Jesus (cf. [John 18:1](#))—David and his entourage “continued up the Mount of Olives” (v. [30](#)) as they moved eastward toward the Jordan River. David made no attempt to hide his distress from his subjects. Covering the head and going about barefoot were both considered expressions of grief and despair in ancient Israelite society (cf. [Jer 14:3–4](#); [Mic 1:8](#)). Out of sympathy for their king, those accompanying David followed his example.

[15:31–32](#) Compounding David’s woes was the news that Ahithophel, David’s most valued counselor, was “among the conspirators with Absalom” (v. [31](#)). Knowing that he himself was powerless to deny Absalom the benefits of Ahithophel’s wisdom, David offered a desperate plea to the Lord.

The very next recorded event following David’s prayer concerning Ahithophel was the king’s encounter with “Hushai the Arkite” (v. [32](#)), who was awaiting David at an ancient worship site “at the summit” of the Mount of Olives. This narrative juxtaposition of David’s prayer with the appearance of Hushai is no accident: it is the writer’s demonstration that the Lord was answering David’s prayers even in exile. The Lord’s love for David was steadfast; as in David’s earlier years (cf. [1 Sam 18:12, 14, 28](#); [2 Sam 5:10](#)), so now also the Lord was with David.

Hushai was obviously in sympathy with David and symbolically identified with the king’s plight by appearing before him with “his robe torn and dust on his head” (cf. [1 Sam 4:12](#); [2 Sam 1:2](#)).

[15:33–37](#) David deeply appreciated the support of his wise friend, yet he realized that Hushai’s counsel was an asset best utilized away from the king’s presence. Knowing that each person who joined his entourage only added to the logistical problems of providing sufficient food, water, shelter, and protection, David forthrightly told Hushai that “if you go with me, you will only be a burden to me” (v. [33](#)). Perhaps, as Gordon suggests, Hushai’s age—and therefore reduced capacity to travel quickly—was also a factor.

Ironically, however, if Hushai were to “return to the city” (v. [34](#)) and declare his allegiance to Absalom, he might be of great value to David’s cause. Having been a leading member of David’s administration (cf. [1 Chr 27:33](#)), he was likely to be treated as a valued asset in Absalom’s fledgling government. And if Hushai did succeed in gaining Absalom’s confidence, then he would be in a position to “help by frustrating Ahithophel’s advice.”

Hushai would not be the only mole in Jerusalem; joining him in the subterfuge would be “Zadok and Abiathar” (v. [35](#)). However, there was a crucial difference between the role that Hushai would play and that which the others carried out. While all three of these men would reside in Jerusalem with Absalom, only Hushai would have a presence “in the king’s palace”; the priestly obligations of the others would keep them away from the king most of the time. Thus it would be up to Hushai to learn—and, hopefully, influence—the new government’s strategies regarding David. Once Hushai acquired this coveted information, he would then be responsible to tell Zadok and Abiathar anything of strategic value he might hear. In turn, their sons would be given this information and would act as couriers in relaying it to David.

Hushai accepted David’s plan, though doing so involved a high degree of risk; if his true intentions were discovered, he would have been summarily executed. Hushai’s willingness to put himself at risk for David’s sake reveals the depth of commitment he had toward his king.

According to the writer, David escaped from the forces of Absalom by the narrowest of margins. After Hushai left David and made the one-mile walk back to the royal city—a journey of no more than half an hour—“Absalom was entering the city” (v. [37](#)). At that vulnerable moment, David and his followers were separated from Absalom’s forces by only one hill. Through his portrayal of this tenuous escape the narrator reaffirms the thesis that the Lord was with David, and he provides additional hope that the Lord would yet bring a good end to the present evil circumstances.

[16:1–4](#) Traveling eastward “a short distance beyond the summit” (v. [1](#)) of the Mount of Olives, David encountered “Ziba, the steward of Mephibosheth.” The meeting was not accidental; “Ziba was waiting to meet” David and had brought two valuable gifts: animals for transportation and food to sustain the group for at least a short while. The “string of donkeys saddled” (v. [1](#)) were “for the king’s household to ride on” (v. [2](#)); no doubt they would have been used by the women, children, and elderly in the group. Ziba’s generous provision was intended to nourish and “refresh those who become exhausted in the desert” (v. [2](#)). The absence of meat in the gift was deliberate, since prepared flesh would quickly have spoiled, and live animals would have greatly impeded the group’s flight.

David reacted to Ziba with two responses—suspicion and gratitude. David’s suspicion was expressed in the form of two questions: “Why have you brought these?” and “Where is your master’s grandson?” The household of Saul was the very group that had worked for seven years following Saul’s death to prevent David’s rule over all Israel; for them now to assist David during this great crisis must have been almost inconceivable to the king.

More puzzling still was the fact that Mephibosheth did not accompany the gift. After all, he was the only member of the Saulide family who was likely to be supportive of David at this time. Ziba’s explanation of Mephibosheth’s absence seemed credible to the king: he was “staying in Jerusalem, because he thinks, ‘Today the house of Israel will give me back my grandfather’s kingdom’ ” (v. [3](#)). Guided by Ziba’s words—which may or may not have been truthful (cf. comments at [19:26–27](#))—in interpreting the evidence at hand, David made a snap decision to disinherit the son of Jonathan: “all that belonged to Mephibosheth” (v. [4](#)) would be given to Ziba, the only member of Saul’s household who showed up to help David during this crisis. As in other situations following God’s pronouncement of judgment on David, the king is shown in a less favorable light. Later he would waver and modify this pronouncement (cf. [19:29](#)).

Ziba accepted the king's offer with humility and goodwill, expressing a wish to "find favor in" the eyes of "the king."

16:5–8 David's darkest suspicions regarding Saul's family were confirmed as the royal procession "approached Bahurim" (v. 5), a nearby Benjamite village (cf. [19:16](#); [1 Kgs 2:8](#)). There Shimei, a relative of Saul, assaulted David's group both verbally and physically. The throwing of stones involved symbolically carrying out a Torah-style execution (cf. [Lev 20:2, 27](#); [24:14, 16](#); [Num 15:35](#); [Deut 13:10; 21:21](#); [22:21, 24](#)) of them. Shimei did this in spite of the fact that David could have responded instantly with deadly force to eliminate this threat to his life.

Shimei's charge against David was that he was a "man of blood"—that is, a murderer—and a "man of Belial" [NIV, "scoundrel"; cf. [1 Sam 25:25](#); [30:22](#); [2 Sam 20:1](#)], that is, a man of base moral character.

Shimei's reasons behind his defiant actions and words toward David were both theological and personal. According to Shimei, David's present troubles were actually from the Lord, brought as judgment for sins David committed against Shimei's relatives. Shimei's reference to Saulide blood that David shed probably is an allusion to David's role in the Gibeonite killing of seven Saulides (cf. [21:5–9](#)). Alternatively, it could be based on some misguided belief, either the assumption that David had fought with the Philistines against Israel on the day Saul and three of his sons died or perhaps the belief that David had commissioned Ish-Bosheth's death. From Shimei's perspective, the Lord had "handed the kingdom over to" Absalom, with the result that David had "come to ruin."

16:9–12 Shimei's words were deeply troubling to many of David's followers, especially "Abishai son of Zeruiah" (v. 9), another of David's nephews who served as a general (cf. [23:18](#); [1 Chr 11:20](#)). When Abishai heard these harsh words spoken in anger against the king, he wondered aloud why "this dead dog" should be allowed to "curse my lord the king." He also offered to "go over" to Shimei "and cut off his head"—the second time he had asked David for permission to kill a Saulide (cf. [1 Sam 26:8](#)). From Abishai's perspective, Shimei deserved to die because he had cursed the ruler of the Lord's people (cf. [Exod 22:28](#)).

Distancing himself from Abner's position, however, David refused to let Abishai execute judgment against Shimei. As in the previous situation involving a threat against a Saulide, David used a theological reason to prohibit Abishai from carrying out his deadly desires (cf. [1 Sam 26:9–11](#)). In this case David reasoned that the Lord might have actually ordered Shimei to "curse David" (v. 10). If it was indeed true that "the LORD has told him to" (v. 11), it would be for David's ultimate benefit; for then the Lord would see David's "distress" and compensatorily repay him "with good for the cursing" (v. 12; cf. [Deut 23:5](#)).

David's central concerns dealt not with Shimei but Absalom. As the king reminded "Abishai and all his officials" (v. 11), the present crisis was fomented by Absalom, "my son who is of my own flesh." By comparison, the Saulides were an inconsequential threat. David was already aware of the resentment held against him by many in Saul's clan, and he had learned to cope with it.

16:13–14 Undaunted by Shimei's persistent show of hatred, "David and his men continued along the road." Slowly they wound their way down the twenty-mile path that descended some 3,700 feet to the Jordan River and came to "their destination" (v. 14) near the ford. The entire group was "exhausted" both physically and emotionally, but at this relatively safe location they "refreshed" themselves.

16:15–19 At this point the account reconnects with a narrative thread left dangling at [15:37](#), presenting events that occurred while the events described in [16:1–14](#) were taking place. Thus, Absalom arrived in Jerusalem even as David and his entourage were making their way to the Jordan. Prominent among those arriving to set up the new government in Jerusalem was Ahithophel.

As Hushai, David's advisor and loyal servant ("friend"), found himself in Absalom's presence, he began carrying out one of the most successful acts of deceit and subterfuge recorded in Israelite history. The greatness of Hushai's performance can only be appreciated as one understands that Hushai was a master of double entendre.

Hushai's subversive ambivalence begins with his first words spoken in Absalom's presence: "Long live the king!" Did these words refer to Absalom, as the social context would indicate, or were they in fact a wish that the king-in-exile be granted life? The careful reader suspects the latter.

Absalom himself was certainly surprised by the apparently warm reception he received from Hushai, for he had expected Hushai to follow David into exile. This naturally caused him to raise questions about the depth of Hushai's "loyalty" (Hb., *hesed*; NIV, "love") to David, the "friend" in whose court he had served for so many years.

Unfazed by Absalom's probing questions, Hushai continued his masterful expressions of ambiguity: "the one chosen by the LORD, by these people, and by all the men of Israel—his I will be, and I will remain with him" (v. 18). Though Hushai never mentioned Absalom's name, in his vanity the upstart king believed these words referred to him. However, for the biblical narrator they were covert affirmations of loyalty to David—whereas the writer repeatedly affirmed that the Lord chose David (cf. [1 Sam 16:1, 12](#); [2 Sam 6:21](#)), no such literary representation of Absalom is given. Furthermore, the men of Israel had previously chosen David as their king (cf. [5:1–3](#)); they were following Absalom only because he had stolen their hearts from their first loyalty (cf. [15:6](#)). Thus, for Hushai to declare his loyalty to an unnamed individual chosen by the Lord and Israel was to take his stand with David.

Even Hushai's declaration that he would serve Absalom "just as I served your father" (v. 19) can be viewed as a silent affirmation of loyalty to David. How had Hushai served David? as David's loyal friend (cf. [1 Chr 27:33](#)); so now as David's loyal friend he would "serve" Absalom. Hushai's semantic subtleties were totally missed by Absalom, and so the sage was fatefully welcomed into his inner council.

[16:20–23](#) Absalom had succeeded in gaining control of both the throne and the royal citadel in an impressive bloodless coup. Now strengthening his grip on both became the central issue for his fledgling administration to deal with. For guidance in this all-important task Absalom sought the advice of Ahithophel.

Ahithophel's plan was brazen, simple, and almost sure to succeed. The plan would accomplish at least two things. First of all, by exercising privileges reserved only for Israel's king, Absalom would unambiguously demonstrate his claim to Israel's throne. At the same time, his outrageous act would energize those participating in the coup: by modeling a flamboyant rejection of King David, others would be emboldened to become "a stench in" David's "nostrils" as well.

For Ahithophel personally, the scheme must have seemed like a particularly satisfying application of the Torah's *lex talionis* ("eye for eye, tooth for tooth ...," cf. [Exod 21:24](#); [Lev 24:20](#); [Deut 19:21](#)). David had had unlawful sexual relations with Ahithophel's granddaughter at the royal palace in Jerusalem, though she was married to another; so now, unlawful sexual relations with David's harem would take place at the same palace—only in this case the retributive act would be ten times greater than the original offense, and in public!

The plan seemed good to Absalom. Accordingly, his attendants "pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof" (v. 22) of the royal residence—the very location in which David had committed adultery in his heart with Ahithophel's relative (cf. [11:2](#))—and there Absalom "lay with his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel."

Absalom followed Ahithophel's advice because of Ahithophel's reputation for wisdom. For all its apparent advantages, however, there was a flaw in Ahithophel's proposal to Absalom that insured its ultimate failure: the plan required the performance of a deed strictly forbidden in the Torah. When Absalom had sexual relations with the members of his father's harem, he committed a crime so heinous that the Torah mandated the death penalty for the man who did it (cf. [Lev 20:11](#)). Absalom might escape David's hand of judgment, but he could never escape the Lord's: divine justice would ultimately prevail, and the Lord would bring Absalom's aspirations crashing down to an inglorious end.

The fact that Ahithophel seriously proposed such a foolhardy plan can be taken as evidence that the Lord had indeed responded to David's plea to turn Ahithophel's counsel into foolishness ([15:31](#)). It stands as one more piece of evidence that the Lord was with David during his hour of crisis. It is also a fulfillment, however, of the Lord's judgment on David in [2 Sam 12:11-12](#).