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“. . . the gospel . . . is the power of God unto salvation . . .” (Romans 1:16)

JOAB: DAVID'S MILITARY CAPTAIN WHO HAD HIS OWN AGENDA (PART 1)

by B. J. Clarke

Ask the average man on the street to name some of the most famous personalities in Bible history and it will not be long until someone utters the name of David. Without question, David is among the most well-known characters of the Bible. It should be remembered, however, that David did not live his life in a vacuum. The story of David is largely the story of his interaction with other personalities of his time.

One of the most prominent and influential personalities of David's time was the man named Joab (*"Jehovah is Father"*). According to 1 Chronicles 2:16, Joab was one of the three sons of David's sister Zeruiah. His brothers were Abishai and Asahel. Scripture does not supply us with the name of Joab's father although, for what it is worth, the historian Josephus calls him "Suri" (*Antiquities, 7.11*). We do know that Joab's father was buried in a sepulcher in Bethlehem (*2 Sam. 2:32*). Beyond this we are left with many unanswered questions concerning Joab. We know nothing about his early childhood and youth. Due to his close family connections with David it is reasonable to conclude that he would have been aware of some of David's exploits during his youth, such as his victory over Goliath. We do not know exactly how Joab came to occupy such an influential position in David's kingdom, but we do know that he played a prominent role in the administration of King David.

JOAB'S MILITARY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

According to Scripture, "Joab the son of Zeruiah was over the host" of King David's military (*2 Sam. 8:16*). The pathway he took to get to this position tells us much about Joab as a person. Unquestionably, Joab was a man of great ambition. He most certainly had aspirations of greatness. When David became king he sought to conquer the city of Jebus (later known as Jerusalem). He said to his soldiers, "Whosoever smiteth the Jebusites first

shall be chief and captain" (*1 Chron. 11:6*). The text continues, "So Joab the son of Zeruiah went first up, and was chief" (*1 Chron. 11:6*). While we appreciate Joab's courage and initiative, the rest of the story of his life reveals that Joab's actions were almost always inseparably connected with his desire to be chief! Joab had an agenda and it was one of self-promotion!

His ambition to be first was advanced by the keen military skills which he possessed. Joab was quite an accomplished soldier and military strategist. While he and the servants of David assembled at the pool of Gibeon, he was challenged to a fight by the leader of Saul's army, one named Abner (*2 Sam. 2:13-14*). Joab agreed, and his men soundly defeated Abner's men (*2 Sam. 2:13-17*). When all was said and done he lost twenty soldiers while Abner lost 360 men (*2 Sam. 2:30-31*). During David's campaign into Edomite territory (*2 Sam. 8:13-14*), Joab spent six months cutting off every male in Edom except for those who escaped (*1 Kings 11:15-16*).

On another occasion the Ammonites had humiliated some of David's soldiers by shaving off one half of their beards, and by cutting their garments down the middle thus revealing their backsides. Fearing retaliation from David, the Ammonites allied themselves with the Syrians as a defensive measure. When David heard of this "he sent Joab, and all the host of the mighty men" (*2 Sam. 10:7*). Joab was definitely up to the task. When he saw that the battle was against him "before and behind," he decided on the strategy of taking "all the choice men of Israel, and put them in array against the Syrians." (*2 Sam. 10:9*). This was a brilliant military strategy; Joab knew that if he could cause the Syrians to retreat, the Ammonites, who did not have the courage or might to fight on their own, would soon follow suit. Thus he put the best soldiers he had in the fray against the Syrians. The rest of the soldiers he put under the command of his brother, Abishai.

Before going out to battle, Joab wisely told his brother, "If the Syrians be too strong for me, then thou shalt help me: but if the children of Ammon be too strong for thee, then I will come and help thee" (*2 Sam. 10:11*). Joab's next statement to Abishai demonstrated courage, a concern for other people, and a confidence in the providence of God: "Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the LORD do that which seemeth him good" (*2 Sam. 10:12*).

When the battle finally commenced, the plan worked brilliantly. He brought the battle to the Syrians and "they fled before him. And when the children of Ammon saw that the Syrians were fled, then fled they also before Abishai, and entered into the city" (*2 Sam. 10:13-14*). Joab returned to Jerusalem as a war-hero "and it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem" (*2 Sam. 11:1*). David never had any doubts about Joab's ability to lead his army into battle. On the other hand, David would discover that there were plenty of reasons to doubt Joab's motives and methods.

JOAB'S MAIN AGENDA

David learned that for all of Joab's military accomplishments there was the underlying problem of Joab's hidden agenda. As talented as Joab was, he was driven first and foremost by an agenda of self-promotion. He was not about to let anyone or anything stop him from carrying out this agenda, even if it meant bloodshed! Episode after episode in Joab's life proves this to be so.

1. The Murder of Abner. After the death of Saul, the men of Judah anointed David as king in Hebron. Meanwhile, Abner, the son of Ner, who had been captain of Saul's military, took Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, to Mahanaim and "made him king over Gilead, and over the

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Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel" (2 Sam. 5:1-9). For two years Ishbosheth reigned over Israel while David ruled over all of Judah.

One day the servants of Saul (with Abner as their commander) and the servants of David (with Joab as their commander) assembled at the same time at the pool of Gibeon. Abner suggested to Joab a contest between the soldiers from both sides. The exact nature of the contest is unclear but Joab agreed and twelve men were selected to represent each side. Apparently, the

contest ended in a mutual massacre because the text records that "they caught every one his fellow by the head, and thrust his sword in his fellow's side; so they fell down together" (2 Sam. 2:16). Both armies reacted and "there was a very sore battle that day; and Abner was beaten, and the men of Israel, before the servants of David" (2 Sam. 2:17). This time there was a clear victor! Abner lost 360 men while David lost only 20 soldiers, but one of the casualties was Joab's brother, Asahel. His death set in motion a series of events that would strain the relationship between David and Joab all of their days.

As Abner fled from the battle scene, Asahel, who was as swift on his feet as a gazelle, pursued after him (2 Sam. 2:18-19). As Abner looked back at his pursuer, he recognized him and urged him to fight one of the young inexperienced soldiers instead of chasing him. Asahel, though quicker than Abner, was not a seasoned soldier. Abner knew that Asahel was no match for him in hand to hand combat and he did not want to have to kill him. He also knew that Joab would come after him to avenge the death of his brother, and Abner wanted no part of this confrontation. He beckoned Asahel to "back off" at least twice (2 Sam. 2:21-22) but Asahel would not retreat. Given no choice but to defend himself Abner waited until Asahel was right behind him and then thrust the other end of his spear backwards into Asahel's mid-section. The force of the collision sent the spear (which was sharpened to a point even on the hinder end) through Asahel's body, literally stopping him dead in his tracks (2 Sam. 2:23)!

As anticipated, Joab and his brother Abishai chased after Abner but were unable to catch him before the sun went down (2 Sam. 2:24). By the time they did catch up to him he had been able to secure reinforcements from Benjamin. However, Abner had no desire to fight, and so he offered Joab a truce. Perhaps seeing that battle conditions were not as favorable now, Joab consented to a cease-fire, but this did not diminish his hostility toward Abner.

The cease-fire did not last long between the forces of Saul and David. The text declares that "there was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David: but David waxed stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker" (2 Sam. 3:1). Abner

remained loyal to Saul's son (2 Sam. 3:6) until Ishbosheth falsely accused him of going in unto one of his father's concubines (2 Sam. 3:7). Abner was so hurt by Ishbosheth's words that he vowed to transfer his allegiance to David (2 Sam. 3:8-9). He pledged to "translate the kingdom from the house of Saul, and to set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan even to Beersheba" (2 Sam. 3:10).

Abner sent messengers to notify David of his change of heart and to seek an alliance together. He promised David that he would help turn all Israel unto him (2 Sam. 3:12). David agreed to the alliance on the condition that Abner would deliver his wife Michal, Saul's daughter, back unto him (2 Sam. 3:13). Perhaps David thought that having her by his side would strengthen his case for reigning over Saul's kingdom.

Abner met David's condition and began persuading the men of Israel to seize the opportunity to have David as their king. Abner came to Hebron with twenty of his men to have a personal meeting with David. King David treated them graciously and prepared a feast for them. The meeting ended peacefully with David sending Abner away to accomplish the task of gathering Israel unto David (2 Sam. 3:17-21).

Meanwhile, Joab returned victoriously to Hebron from the battlefield, bringing "a great spoil" (2 Sam. 3:22). His mood soured quickly when he learned that Abner had enjoyed a great feast with David and that he had left in peace. What a perfect opportunity for vengeance David had wasted! At least that's the way Joab saw it. "Then Joab came to the king, and said, What hast thou done? behold, Abner came unto thee; why is it that thou hast sent him away, and he is quite gone?" (2 Sam. 3:24). Joab scolded David for not being bright enough to discern that Abner was nothing more than a deceiver and a spy (2 Sam. 3:25).

We are not told in the text what David said in response to Joab but it is obvious that he was unconvinced by his assertions. This is evidenced by what Joab did next. "And when Joab was come out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, which brought him again from the well of Sirah: but David knew it not. And when Abner was returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside in the gate to speak with him quietly, and smote him there under the fifth rib, that he died, for the blood of Asahel his

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brother" (2 Sam. 3:26-27). Joab's actions reveal that David had no intentions of doing anything to Abner. Notwithstanding this, Joab decided to ignore the authority of the king and take matters into his own hands. He had an agenda to carry out and if it was different than the king's agenda then so be it.

In Joab's actions we can see some of the common tactics of how those with an agenda go about to accomplish their aims. **First, those with an agenda are not hesitant to rebel against those in authority to accomplish their purposes.** When Joab sent messengers to call Abner back to Hebron he did so behind the back of the one in authority ("but David knew it not"). He knew that he could never get permission from David to do what he wanted to do, so he decided just to do it himself.

Second, those with an agenda often are willing to use deceit to accomplish their goals. What did the messengers of Joab say to Abner to cause him to return to Hebron? Perhaps they told him that David had thought of something else he wished to discuss with him. Or perhaps they told him that David had decided that he wanted Abner to meet with Joab to discuss the transition. Who knows what Joab told them to tell Abner, but whatever they told him accomplished their goal of getting him to return.

Third, those with an agenda are willing to destroy others to get what they want. In this case, Joab wanted Abner dead. It might be argued that this was justifiable because Abner had murdered his brother Asahel. However, Abner killed Asahel in self-defense, not in a premeditated cold-blooded murder. Even if Joab thought that Abner deserved punishment for what he did to Asahel he did not have the authority to carry out his own version of vigilante justice.

The text clearly indicates that Joab's primary reason for killing Abner was to exact vengeance for the death of his brother Asahel (2 Sam. 3:27, 30). However, it is not impossible that Joab had a secondary agenda for murdering Abner that went beyond gaining a measure of retribution over his brother's death. Joab was David's military commander but he saw Abner, a grizzled

military commander in his own right, drawing ever nearer to David. There is every reason to believe that Joab saw Abner as potential threat and rival for the position of commander over David's army. In Joab's world of self-promotion there was no room for qualified men like Abner to be at the king's fingertips. He already hated Abner for what he did to Asahel and now Joab had one more reason to want to do away with him.

When David learned that Joab and his brother Abishai had killed Abner he was appalled. He publicized that he and his kingdom were guiltless in this action and that all responsibility for such should "rest on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house" (2 Sam. 3:29). David went on to say, "Let there not fail from the house of Joab one that hath an issue, or that is a leper, or that leaneth on a staff or that falleth on the sword, or that lacketh bread" (2 Sam. 3:29).

David commanded Joab and all the people with him at least to have the courtesy to rend their clothes, wear sackcloth and mourn before Abner (2 Sam. 3:31). At Abner's funeral, David expressed his grief that Abner had fallen before "wicked men" (2 Sam. 3:34), thus indicating David's assessment of Joab and Abishai. On the other hand, he said of Abner that "a prince and a great man" had fallen in Israel (2 Sam. 3:38). He also declared that "these men the sons of Zeruiah be too hard for me" and he reminded the people that "the Lord shall reward the doer of evil according to his wickedness" (2 Sam. 3:39). Regrettably, this would not be the last time Joab would shed blood to advance his agenda, and even more tragic is the fact that David would exploit this characteristic of Joab for his own selfish purposes.

2. An Accomplice To The Murder of Uriah The Hittite. While Joab and the armies of Israel went out to the battlefield, "David tarried still at Jerusalem" (2 Sam. 11:1). Of course, the rest is history, and a rather infamous history, to say the least. It started with a lustful look, which led to adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. When Bathsheba informed David that she was with child, "David sent to Joab, saying, Send me Uriah the Hittite. And Joab sent Uriah to David" (2 Sam. 11:6). David

tried to get Uriah to spend the night with Bathsheba so that everyone would think Uriah was the father of the child she was carrying. However, David underestimated Uriah's integrity. Uriah was unwilling to spend the night in a comfortable bed when all of his comrades were sleeping out in open fields. As "Plan B," David tried to get Uriah drunk so that he might lose his inhibitions and spend the night with Bathsheba. When this plan also failed, David engineered a hidden agenda of his own. He gave a letter to Uriah and instructed him to hand deliver it to Joab. The letter instructed Joab, "Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten and die" (2 Sam. 11:15).

How did Joab respond to such a request? Did he fire off a letter condemning David for such a suggestion? Did he send word back to David refusing to be an accomplice to murder? On the contrary, "Joab observed the city" and "assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men were" (2 Sam. 11:16). As planned, Uriah the Hittite died in the battle and Joab sent a messenger back to David to tell him many things, including the fact that "Uriah the Hittite is dead also" (2 Sam. 11:21-24).

It is fair to ask why Joab was so willing to participate in the murder of an innocent man. Perhaps the answer lies in the root of Joab's obsession to be in a position of prominence and power. Joab was bright enough to know that a scandal in David's kingdom could cost David his throne. If David was no longer on the throne then it was very likely that Joab would no longer be the military captain. A new king might have someone else in mind for the job. As far as Joab was concerned it was in his best interest to keep David on the throne. Moreover, Joab would now possess a powerful piece of information about David that he might be able to use to manipulate David in time to come. **People with hidden agendas are always looking for tools they can use to accomplish their purposes!** Thus, Joab's participation in the murder of Uriah the Hittite was not necessarily a favor to David as much as it was an act of selfishness on the part of Joab! Joab was always concerned with how something would

POWER

August, 2008
Volume Eighteen, Number Eight



Deuteronomy 5:32

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POWER is a monthly publication overseen by the elders of the Southaven church of Christ, Southaven, Mississippi.



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either help him or hurt him personally!

3. The Murder of Absalom. Even before his part in the murder of Absalom, Joab was scheming and meddling in the affairs of Absalom's life for his own personal benefit. After Absalom ordered the murder of his brother Amnon, for raping their sister Tamar, he fled to Geshur and was alienated from his father and Jerusalem for three years (2 Sam. 13:38). Joab was personally interested in effecting a reconciliation between David and Absalom for at least two reasons. In the first place, Joab knew that David longed to be reconciled to his son. If Joab could make it happen he would appear to be the hero in David's eyes thus gaining capital for a long-term relationship with David. Joab knew that David was not happy with his murder of Abner and occasionally he looked for ways to "smooth out" the rough edges of their relationship. For instance, after crippling the city of Rabbah, Joab sent messengers to David encouraging him to "encamp against the city, and take it: lest I take the city, and it be called after my name" (2 Sam. 12:28). It would be nice to view this as nothing more than a magnanimous gesture on Joab's part but his perpetual self-centeredness in other episodes of his life force us to wonder whether it was otherwise. The same can be said for Joab's motivation in bringing about the reconciliation of David and Absalom. It appears to have been a means to the end of courting David's favor.

In the second place, if David and Absalom could once again be on good terms, then Absalom would almost certainly be the next king. Joab knew that "in all Israel there was none so much to be praised as Absalom for his beauty: from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him" (2 Sam. 14:25). Physical attractiveness and positions of power often go hand in hand. Absalom's physical attractiveness would make him a very popular choice among the people to be the next king. Anticipating this possibility, Joab's agenda was to be on good terms with Absalom so

that if and when Absalom became king he would retain Joab as his military leader.

Not surprisingly, Joab employed deception in initiating his agenda of restoring Absalom to David's good graces. He persuaded a woman from Tekoah to put on garments of grief and come to king David, pretending to be in mourning. Joab even "put the words in her mouth" that she should say to the king (2 Sam. 14:2-3). She told David that her husband was dead and that one of her sons had killed her other son while fighting in the field. Moreover, she told David that her entire family was trying to get her to turn over the son who had killed her other son so that they might punish him to death. She claimed that she was reluctant to do this because it would completely extinguish her offspring from the earth (2 Sam. 14:4-7).

She asked David to see to it that none of the revengers of blood would destroy her son. David responded, "As the Lord liveth, there shall not one hair of thy son fall to the earth" (2 Sam. 14:11). Upon hearing this, the woman charged David with being inconsistent. She said, "For the king doth speak this thing as one that is faulty, in that the king does not fetch home again his banished" (2 Sam. 14:13).

Hearing these words, David sensed that Joab had put her up to this charade. Thus he asked, "Is not the hand of Joab with thee in all this?" She confessed that Joab "bade me, and he put all these words in the mouth of thine handmaid" (2 Sam. 14:19). **It is very interesting to observe that those who have an agenda often hide behind the work of others to get what they want! Those who have an agenda often put words in the mouths of others and lurk in the shadows while others do "their dirty work" for them!**

To be continued in next issue...

D. R. W. Wood, New Bible Dictionary (InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962). 587.

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