



FEED MY SHEEP

PUBLISHED BY JAMES W. BRUGGEMAN
STONE KINGDOM MINISTRIES
P. O. BOX 6388
ASHEVILLE, NC 28816 U.S.A.

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Politics, the Handmaiden of Providence

Last month's FMS comprised an examination of some genealogical aspects of David's wives. Now we come to some exciting political intrigues. Remember, at this point, David has been acclaimed king over Judah only. Saul's son, Ishbosheth, has been ruling over the rest of Israel with his uncle (technically, his great-uncle) Abner being the power behind the throne.

2 Samuel 3:6 And it came to pass, while there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, that Abner made himself strong for the house of Saul. [Alternate rendering: Abner "was strengthening his hold on the house of Saul."]

7 And Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah: and Ishbosheth said to Abner, Wherefore hast thou gone in unto my father's concubine?

Here is the first incident which we wish to consider as we observe divine providence acting through politics. First, it could be argued that Ishbosheth was falsely accusing Abner, because it does not tell us here that Abner actually had intimate relations with the concubine Rizpah; it simply says that Ishbosheth *accused* him of it. But we are going to assume that it did occur.

This was not just a simple act of lust on the part of Abner; it was a move of *calculated political intimidation*. It was customary in those centuries, that when the king died, his concubines were passed along to his successor. Therefore, the concubines were Ishbosheth's harem. Abner, in taking one of the concubines, was therefore pushing the envelope to see how much he could insult young Ishbosheth without Ischy taking any

action to try to stop him. By taking the king's concubine, Abner was in effect claiming the right to the throne itself.

How Ischy would respond would define the limits of their respective power. Abner had evidently *finally* pushed the hot button. Ishbosheth is not a *total* fool. He realizes Abner is trying to usurp the throne here, so Ischy is in essence accusing Abner of treason. Cleverly, Abner plays the game to the hilt now, feigning like he is the one who has the right to be insulted.

8 Then was Abner very wroth for the words of Ishbosheth, and said, Am I a dog's head, which against Judah do show kindness this day unto the house of Saul thy father, to his brethren, and to his friends, and have not delivered thee into the hand of David, that thou chargest me to day with a fault concerning this woman?

This whole outcome was expected by Abner. It is the result he desired so as to have an excuse to say the following:

9 So do God to Abner, and more also, except, as YHWH hath sworn to David, even so I do to him;

10 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.

What is Abner threatening there? Isn't he basically saying "Alright, Ishbosheth, if you think I'm a traitor, then I may as well defect over to David and help him get the entire kingdom that God has prom-

ised him.” That’s what he appears to me to be saying. And he knew his nephew Ishbosheth was a jellyfish with no backbone, so now the stage was set.

11 And he could not answer Abner a word again, because he feared him.

Poor Ishbosheth! It is clear he just did not have the mental, moral and political equipment to be an effective ruler. But of course, how perfectly Providential! This way, the whole nation would yearn for a real leader. It is worth noting in verses 9 & 10 that Abner *knew* the will of YHWH was to establish David as king, and yet up to this point, Abner had been in opposition to that known will. That is sin, isn’t it? The political intrigue now continues with Abner immediately testing the waters with David to see if there is an opening for an alliance between them.

12 And Abner sent messengers to David on his behalf, saying, Whose is the land?

In other words, isn’t the whole land of Israel yours to rule over by God’s decree and promise?

saying also, Make thy league with me, and, behold, my hand shall be with thee, to bring about all Israel unto thee.

13 And he said, Well; I will make a league with thee: but one thing I require of thee, that is, Thou shalt not see my face, except thou first bring Michal Saul’s daughter, when thou comest to see my face.

There is a touching parallel here between the lives of Joseph and David. It is in the phrase “thou shalt not see my face, except thou first bring Michal, Saul’s daughter...” Oh, by the way, what tribe is Michal from? ...Benjamin. Remember when Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt during the famine to buy grain. They had no idea that he was their brother and they revealed that they still had their youngest brother, Benjamin, at home with their aging father, and that Benjamin was the light of Jacob’s life.

Then Joseph, the prime minister of Egypt, told them they would *not see his face again unless Benjamin was with them* (Genesis 43:3, 5). When they did come back with Benjamin, Joseph revealed his identity secretly to Benjamin alone, to Benjamin first. Joseph represents the so-called lost ten tribes and in the latter days, their identity will be revealed to Benja-

min first. But looking now at this demand from David, he probably had mixed motives in getting Michal back. Politically, having Saul’s daughter as his wife once again would strengthen David’s claim to the throne of Saul. Moreover, he may well have retained some considerable affection for her. And he knew that she had loved him at one time.

But again, this would not only be a victory over Ishbosheth on the political chessboard (David gets his queen back), but in the eyes of all the people of the ten northern tribes, they would now see the tide turning in David’s favor. Concomitantly, they would realize how impotent King Ishbosheth is. Apparently, there is no downside for David.

14 And David sent messengers to Ishbosheth Saul’s son, saying, Deliver me my wife Michal, which I espoused to me for an hundred foreskins of the Philistines.

15 And Ishbosheth sent, and took her from her husband, even from Phaltiel the son of Laish.

David had been waiting patiently for God’s providence to bring about circumstances to fulfill His promise to David. With Abner’s taking of Rizpah, David detects the Providential hand now moving and so he is emboldened to make the move demanding Michal from Ishbosheth.

Here again, like Abner’s taking the concubine, this was David’s calculated political move to see what kind of political backbone Ishy had. Clearly, Ishy was wishy-washy. He was a weak sister. A wimp on the throne—by God’s design, of course. General Abner volunteered to accompany Michal on her journey to David.

16 And her husband went with her along weeping behind her to Bahurim. Then said Abner unto him, Go, return. And he returned.

17 And Abner had communication with the elders of Israel, saying, Ye sought for David in times past to be king over you:

Truth be told, it was solely Abner’s strong influence over them that had prevented many elders from openly declaring for David before this time. Now Abner gives his blessing on them defecting to David’s side.

18 Now then do it: for YHWH hath spoken

of David, saying, By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel out of the hand of the Philistines, and out of the hand of all their enemies.

19 And Abner also spake in the ears of Benjamin: and Abner went also to speak in the ears of David in Hebron all that seemed good to Israel, and that seemed good to the whole house of Benjamin.

The character of Abner is patently hypocritical because here he is pretending religious conviction in order to further his own personal agenda of revenge upon Ishbosheth and to obtain for himself a high position in David's administration. Nonetheless, as always, politics is the handmaiden of Providence, meaning God uses political conspiracies and the evil machinations of men to accomplish His Divine plan. What an awesome God!

It was important politically that the tribe of Benjamin be given special attention by Abner because they had the most to lose in terms of tribal prestige. Up until now, theirs had been the tribe of the monarchy. Besides having jobs in the administration, there were many other ways in which their tribe was benefited by that fact. (Sort of like Democrats and Republicans today, wouldn't you agree?) If the Benjaminites were *not* brought fully aboard, then they could prove to be a very painful thorn in the side of David's regency because geographically, the territory of Benjamin bordered Judah immediately on the north.

20 So Abner came to David to Hebron, and twenty men with him. And David made Abner and the men that were with him a feast.

Just to recapitulate the sequence of events here, Abner takes the concubine Rizpah. This provokes Ishbosheth to charge Abner with being a traitor. Uncle Abner responds by threatening Ishy that if that is what he thinks, then he may as well help David gather all the tribes of Israel to his kingdom.

Abner then sends envoys to David with a proposal of alliance. David tells the envoys to tell Abner they have a deal as long as David gets Michal from Ishy. Knowing they have a deal, Abner then has his behind-the-scenes discussions with the elders of the ten tribes, with a special meeting with the leaders of Benjamin alone, all to let them know that they can now safely and openly support David as king over all of them. Meanwhile, David has sent an ambassador to

Ishy demanding Michal. Ishy is so wishy-washy that he still has to lean on Abner for advice on how to respond to David's demand.

Abner, of course, tells him he has no choice and that he, Abner, will personally escort Michal to David. This then gives the sly Abner a legitimate reason for meeting David face to face. So after Abner hands over Michal, he and David retreat to Camp David for a private meeting. (Oops, maybe I made up that last part.)

21 And Abner said unto David, I will arise and go, and will gather all Israel unto my lord the king, that they may make a league with thee, and that thou mayest reign over all that thine heart desireth. And David sent Abner away; and he went in peace.

22 And, behold, the servants of David and Joab came from pursuing a troop [i.e., from making a raid], and brought in a great spoil with them: but Abner was not with David in Hebron; for he had sent him away, and he was gone in peace.

23 When Joab and all the host that was with him were come, they told Joab, saying, Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he hath sent him away, and he is gone in peace.

24 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?

25 Thou knowest Abner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive thee, and to know thy going out and thy coming in, and to know all that thou doest.

No question about it, David is receiving a real tongue-lashing here from his top military commander. Joab is a very strong-willed individual and does not hesitate one second to speak his mind, castigating and excoriating David for such *foolish* behavior as to trust Abner. David apparently just sits there and takes it.

It is an interesting contrast and parallel here between David and Ishbosheth, and Joab and Abner. There is an uncle-nephew relationship surrounding both thrones. Uncle Abner is the strong-willed, top military commander who treats his nephew Ishbosheth as a wad of putty.

In contrast, David, the uncle of Joab, is on the throne and is treated by his strong-willed nephew and

military commander, Joab, as though he is a piece of putty. And, as we see, David, for now at least, appears to acquiesce to the dominance of Joab over him... which is strange, to say the least, because we know that David is no Ischy-wishy wimp. After all, when he was only 17 years old, he had faced a ten-foot offspring of the Nephilim named Goliath. Why then, does David sit there and take this abuse from his supposed subordinate?

26 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.

27 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 brother.

It is doubtful whether Abner would have turned around and come back to Hebron unless Joab's messengers told him that it was on David's authority that they were sent. Once he gets back to the gates of Hebron, he sees Joab there who assures him he is sent by David to discuss some further particulars. Abner lets down his guard and Joab whips out his dagger and stabs him in the gut, in the very place "under the fifth rib," where Abner had stabbed Joab's brother Asahel.

Joab's bitterness and hatred for Abner for killing his brother, Asahel, was now avenged, but this was certainly not his only motive. There was jealousy involved here because Joab did not want Abner coming into David's inner circle and threatening his own position as the top general of David's armies.

Politics and Providence. This was a political assassination. But once again, it was the providential means by which God accomplished several of His purposes. First of all, it was retribution upon Abner for his wicked ways, for his rebellion against David and against God, when his own conscience knew the will of God.

Secondly, God took Abner out of the picture so that David would not owe his kingdom to the deceit and treachery of Abner, but to God's Providence alone. You see, had Abner lived to a ripe old age, he could always say to David, "Look, buddy, you'd still be king over Judah only, had it not been for me bringing the other ten tribes to you on a silver platter." David would have always been in his debt.

Of course, what are the people, particularly those of the northern ten tribes going to think when they hear that Joab assassinated Abner? They are going to assume that David ordered Joab to do it. In modern terms, David has a huge public relations problem at this point. So what does he do? He calls a press conference in prime time.

28 And afterward when David heard it, he said, I and my kingdom are guiltless before YHWH for ever from the blood of Abner the son of Ner:

29 Let it rest on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house; and 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.

About all that David felt he could do in the face of Joab's overpowering strength at this time was to pronounce a public curse on them. We are not told much if anything about Joab's descendants but they obviously faded from the scene and had no further importance in the national affairs of Israel.

30 So Joab and Abishai his brother slew Abner, because he had slain their brother Asahel at Gibeon in the battle.

This tells us that it was in fact a conspiracy because Abishai was evidently complicit in the plot in some manner, the details of which we are not told. This also explains why David's curse was not only on the house of Joab but on his father's house, which would include the house of Abishai as well.

31 And David said to Joab, and to all the people that were with him, Rend your clothes, and gird you with sackcloth, and mourn before Abner. And king David himself followed the bier.

There is much more intrigue and political conspiracy to come. We will pick up the story here next month.

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