

DAVID'S COUNSEL TO SOLOMON TO DEAL WITH JOAB AND SHIMEI

At first sight it does appear that David falls victim to the human desire for vengeance and retribution - the 'get even' syndrome in human nature that we are so familiar with. However, the truth is that David is actually seeking to vindicate Yahweh's righteousness in advising Solomon to deal wisely (1 Kings 2:6,9) with the perpetrators of capital crimes that he himself was unable to do. This becomes clear from a careful reading of 1 Kings 2:1-9. In verse 3 he counsels Solomon to "keep the charge of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses". It is inconceivable that his advice to deal with Joab and Shimei could be inconsistent with that injunction. That he asks Solomon to care for the children of Barzillai (v.7) is also implicit proof that this is not about revenge, but rather about doing right by the promises and commitments he had made.

David was restricted by two road blocks to himself upholding the righteousness of God in relation to Joab and Shimei. He had used Joab as his agent to murder Uriah and Joab doubtless had David's letter (2 Sam. 11:15) in his possession. Like Aaron before him (Lev. 10:19), David felt completely unworthy of dealing with a case in which he himself was a failure. He had murdered Uriah (his 'competition' for Bathsheba who had steadfastly resisted masking David's adultery by going down to his house). Like David, Joab later murdered his competition for the role of captain of the host. How could David stand in judgement of Joab! Similarly, with Shimei David had tied his own hands. On returning from Mahanaim David swore an oath to a seemingly repentant Shimei that he (David) would not put him to death for his treasonous behavior when David was fleeing from Absalom (2 Sam. 19:23). The law of Ex. 22:28 - "Thou shalt not revile God, nor curse a ruler of thy people" (RV), required Shimei to be dealt with and in that Abishai was correct - 2 Sam. 19:21 - "Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the LORD'S anointed?" Understandable failure by David to get this right at the time only led others like Sheba to revolt against the anointed king with impunity (2 Sam. 20:1-2). David made several errors of judgement during this period - publicly mourning for Absalom as his loyal soldiers returned from the battle; appointing Amasa, the opposing General, to replace Joab who had defeated him (weakening himself against Sheba and almost guaranteeing Amasa's eventual demise); and believing a conniving Ziba against the later revealed truthful words and appearance of Jonathan's disabled son Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 16:1-4; 19:24-30). It is fair to say that a gnawing conscience based on vivid memories of past grievous failures (see David's confession - 2 Sam. 16:10-12), had made him feel completely helpless as a leader and a deserving recipient of Divine judgement.

The judgements meted out by Solomon on Adonijah, Joab, Abiathar and Shimei were all just and right. By seeking the hand of Abishag in marriage, Adonijah was craftily endeavoring to make himself king again. It was the practice of new kings to take the wives of the former king. Note Ahithophel's initial counsel to Absalom - 2 Sam. 16:21 - "Go in unto thy father's concubines, which he hath left to keep the house." David himself insisted that Michal, Saul's daughter who had been given to another man be returned to him before any deal could be done with Abner (2 Sam. 3:13). Abner stepped over the line himself when he took Rizpah, Saul's concubine (2 Sam. 3:7) and was rebuked by Ish-bosheth. Accordingly, Adonijah rightly paid with his life for treason. Joab was a double murderer and should have been dealt with in the reign of David were it not for the moral hold he had over David as the bearer of dark secrets (there is no evidence that David's letter to Joab via the hand of Uriah was ever made public). His death beside the altar was perfectly just - there was no mercy for this man at the very place which spoke of the willingness of Yahweh to forgive repentant sinners. The sacking of Abiathar too was just and a fulfillment of the edict against the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2 :35-36; 3:11-14; 1 Kings 2:26-27), thus returning the high-priesthood to its rightful family -

the family of Eleazer. David did not do this for three reasons - (1) the loyalty of Abiathar to him right up until the usurpation of Adonijah; (2) the sense of guilt David felt for telling untruths to Ahimelech (Abiathar's father and high-priest) in the presence of Doeg occasioning the death of Abiathar's entire family (1 Sam. 22:22); and (3) David's consciousness of his adulterous behavior with Bathsheba (though forgiven by God, he could never forgive himself - Ps. 51:3). Was not Eli's house characterised by the unlawful deeds of Hophni and Phineas who "lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation" (1 Sam. 2:22)? Hypocrisy was something that David eschewed. In the same way that Hophni and Phineas made men abhor the offering of Yahweh (1 Sam. 2:17), David had "given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14).

As for Shimei, the applied wisdom of Solomon saw him lose his life by his own choices. Shimei did not die by the sword because he cursed David, though that would have been just. He died because he swore an oath not to leave Jerusalem for any reason and within 3 years had broken that oath. Knowing he was worthy of death for cursing David, Shimei readily accepted the terms of Solomon to build a house in Jerusalem (which was in fact in the territory of Benjamin, his tribe) - 1 Kings 2:36-38. He signed his own death warrant for a reason related to, but quite separate to his sin of cursing the king. David and Solomon had kept the terms of David's original oath to Shimei.

The wisdom of Solomon was revealed very early in the discernment of human behavior and emotions. This became obvious in his treatment of the dispute between two harlots over the living child - 1 Kings 3:16-28. Solomon knew David was right and that the irascible character of Shimei would ultimately be his undoing. As he said to him - "Thou knowest all the wickedness which thine heart is privy to...." (1 Kings 2:44). Shimei had a volatile and uncontrollable temper which could not abide challenges to his personal interests. His hatred of David stemmed from the fact that the tribe of Benjamin lost the mantle of royalty when David became king, and he bristled at the fact that two of his servants like David took refuge in Gath with a king called Achish (1 Kings 2:39)! Really? It was from the shadow of Achish that David had returned to Israel to become king in the place of a Benjamite! It was too much for the angry and bitter Shimei and he committed 'suicide' by going to Gath to reclaim his servants. In the end, we are all the arbiters of our own destiny.