

***A Narrative Reading of Solomon's
Execution of Joab in 1 Kings 1–2:
Letting Story Interpret Story***

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The morally problematic story in 1 Kings 1–2 of Solomon's rise to power—particularly his execution of Joab—has troubled scholars for years. Such questionable brutality seems to fly in the face of the commonly held picture of young king Solomon as a wise and godly ruler. This problem reflects not so much a problem with the text or history itself, but rather with our reading and understanding of both Solomon and the text itself. Perhaps the most significant contribution narrative criticism has had on the field of biblical studies is its stress on allowing the story itself to shape our understanding of the people and events in question. The events of 1 Kings 1–2, in actuality, serve both as the conclusion to David's reign and the introduction to Solomon's reign. Therefore, given the fact that Solomon's stated reasons for killing Joab hearken back to earlier episodes concerning Abner and Amasa, the story itself impels us to interpret the circumstances surrounding Joab's death in the light of those of Abner and Amasa. When we do that, we find numerous literary clues in the text that help shape our understanding of both Solomon's actions and the state of the kingdom itself.

KEY WORDS: *Narrative, Literary Reading, Solomon, Joab*

The narrative of Solomon's ascension to the throne of Israel in 1 Kgs 1–2 is one of the most intriguing narratives in all of Scripture. In it, an aged and possibly senile David is, or is not, manipulated by Bathsheba into declaring Solomon to be the next king, despite the fact that Solomon *is not* David's eldest son. Not only that, but the text specifically states that David never showed any displeasure toward his eldest son Adonijah when he went about declaring that he would be the next king. Once Solomon becomes king, despite his reassurances to Adonijah that he would not kill him, Solomon accuses Adonijah of plotting to take over

the throne because Adonijah has asked permission to marry Abishag the Shunammite. Solomon then proceeds to execute his brother, to banish David's long-time high priest Abiathar, and to execute Joab, David's commander who had been at David's side throughout his entire reign.

Solomon's actions in 1 Kgs 1–2 have troubled many scholars for years. Iain Provan calls Solomon's purge of Adonijah, Abiathar, and Joab "a fairly sordid story of power-politics thinly disguised as a morality tale."¹ The fact that 1 Kgs tells us that it was David himself who told Solomon to deal "wisely" with Joab—not to let "his gray hair go down to Sheol in peace" (1 Kgs 2:6)—is so shocking that C. L. Seow speculates that this passage was nothing more than a "pro-Solomonic apologist attributing to David the decision to eliminate Joab, who posed a threat to Solomon."²

Despite David's supposed speech to Solomon, when one considers that both Abiathar's banishment and Joab's execution came on the heels of what Solomon perceived to be a grasp for power by Adonijah, it is no wonder why so many scholars view Solomon's actions with suspicion. After all, if the bloodguilt that Joab supposedly brought upon the Davidic house was so severe, why was his execution not carried out sooner? Even though the murders of Abner and Amasa may have been the *stated* reason why Solomon had Joab executed, the *real* reason seems to have been that Solomon saw both Abiathar and Joab, having originally backed Adonijah, as a threat to his power. Jerome T. Walsh puts it this way: "[Solomon] is always attentive to the niceties of legal observance, yet he is not above twisting evidence, and, if need be, falsifying it in order to gain what he wants."³

Nevertheless, although we would be right to view Solomon's actions with a high degree of suspicion, we would be wrong to assume that 1 Kgs 1–2 is nothing more than a poor piece of propaganda to justify Solomon's bad actions. After all, to claim that Solomon is merely twisting evidence for personal gain, or that a pro-Solomonic apologist simply put the decision to kill Joab in David's mouth, is to claim something for which there is no textual evidence. Try as we might, we cannot get behind the text to "what really happened."

1. Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 40.

2. C. L. Seow, "I and II Kings," in *The New Interpreter's Bible 3* (ed. Leander E. Keck; Abigdon, 1999), 27.

3. Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996), 38.

Upon discussing the nature of written texts and their relationship to history, Jacques Derrida has famously stated that “there is nothing outside the text.”⁴ One cannot get behind the text to the actual event because, for all practical purposes, the text is the only window that allows one to see any glimpse of that historical event. In other words, that “textual window” to a historical event is not really even a window—it *is the history*. All history is interpreted, and the text is the interpreted history we have. There is no other. This realization has a significant impact on how we read biblical texts in general, and in this case, 1 Kgs 1–2 in particular. When evaluating Solomon’s actions in 1 Kgs 1–2, the only window we are allowed to look through—the only history we have—is that of 1 Kgs 1–2.

This article will focus specifically on Solomon’s execution of Joab and ask the question, “Was Solomon’s execution of Joab just?” In attempting to answer this question, though, we must assume that the writer of 1 Kgs was a competent writer who intentionally framed his story in such a way as to convey a specific point of view regarding the events surrounding both Solomon’s rise to power in general, and Solomon’s execution of Joab in particular. Therefore, what is needed is a close literary reading of the text in order to let the story itself provide the clues that might help put the situation in a clearer light.

Fortunately, the author of 1 Kgs gives us two narrative clues that help interpret and understand exactly what is going on with Solomon’s execution of Joab. In both David’s final speech to Solomon in 1 Kgs 2:1–9 and Solomon’s order to execute Joab in 1 Kgs 2:31–33, references are made to the earlier episodes in which Joab had killed two other commanders: Abner, the general of David’s rival Ishbaal who was in the midst of switching his allegiance from Ishbaal to David (2 Sam 3:6–37), and Amasa, Absalom’s former general whom David promoted to take Joab’s place as the general of his army, but who had delayed in putting down Sheba’s rebellion Sheba (2 Sam 20:1–12).

This article will argue that the narrative of 1 Kgs 1–2 invites the reader to interpret Solomon’s execution of Joab in light of the two earlier episodes of 2 Sam 3:6–37 and 20:1–12. When this is done, we find that all three episodes center on a question of loyalty surrounding each murdered man that is not clearly resolved in the biblical text itself. Indeed, even though the *stated* reasons concerning all three murders are clear, the biblical text seems to intentionally *subvert itself* by providing additional information in each murder that questions those stated reasons.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. G. Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

The overall effect of all three biblical narratives, therefore, is that it is impossible to read them as only political propaganda or morality tales.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PAST SCHOLARSHIP

We must first pause, though, to discuss the ways in which scholars have labeled the Succession Narrative.⁵ As Simon DeVries has pointed out, it was German scholar Leonard Rost who “persuasively argued that 2 Sam 9–20, 1 Kgs 1–2 was a propaganda piece legitimizing Solomon’s selection over David’s other sons to be his father’s successor.”⁶ This view of the Succession Narrative as a pro-Solomon work of propaganda, consequently, became largely accepted by most scholars.

Nevertheless, there have been generally three basic challenges to this view. First, in direct contradiction to Rost’s theory, Lienhard Delekat argued that an “anti-Davidic and anti-Solomonic polemic pervades the whole narrative.”⁷ Although David Gunn applauds Delekat’s work, he still questions—rightly so—Delekat’s claim that the *entire* narrative is anti-Solomon.⁸ Second, a number of historical-critical scholars (Wilrthwein, Veijola, and Langlamet) challenged Rost’s theory by arguing that the narrative has gone through various stages of redaction. As Gunn explains, these scholars claimed that “[t]here was originally an anti-Solomonic (and to some extent anti-Davidic) primitive text which has been supplemented by material favourable to the dynasty in order to transform it into its present, pro-Solomonic, edition.”⁹ Simply put, whereas Rost argued that the Succession Narrative was pro-Solomonic from the start, and Delekat argued that it was really anti-Solomonic, Wilrthwein, Veijola, and Langlamet argued that it was *originally* anti-

5. For a more extensive treatment of this issue, see David Gunn, *The Story of David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978), 17–33; Simon DeVries, *1 Kings* (WBC 12; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 8–10; and Walter Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel: Tenth Century B.C.E.* (trans. Joachim Vette; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 228–40.

6. DeVries, *1 Kings*, 8. Dietrich echoes this analysis when he states that Rost argued that the entire Succession Narrative culminated with 1 Kings 1–2, “the report of how Solomon, not a member of the house of Saul and not one of Solomon’s older brothers, rose to the throne. The narrative was concerned with explaining and legitimizing this somewhat surprising outcome” (*The Early Monarchy in Israel*, 231).

7. See Gunn, *The Story of David*, 22.

8. “Have a host of critics been totally wrong in detecting in the story an underlying sympathy for David, despite his undoubted short-comings? I doubt it.” *Ibid.*, 23.

9. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

Solmonic, but then was redacted to where it is now, in its present form, pro-Solomonic.

Similarly, Walter Dietrich holds that the narrative was written shortly after the actual events by someone who was “from among democratically minded Israelite citizens where basic norms of human behavior were still important and where the behavior of the royal family was met with a mixture of anger and disgust . . . This cynical original succession narrative was dulled and mitigated by later redactors who placed these narratives in the service of quite different intentions”—namely, that although David and Solomon were clearly flawed individuals, they still “would prove God’s faithfulness to his promises to David.”¹⁰ He concludes with, “The precise relation of these added redactional layers, including the texts that belonged to each, has not been fully clarified.”¹¹

The problem with all these proposals, though, has been best articulated by both Gunn and DeVries. Regarding the view of scholars like Veijola, DeVries gives perhaps the harshest, albeit well-warranted, criticism when he says:

[Veijola] neglects the structure of the elemental units, hence has no eye for their function and aim, whether in isolation or in early combinations. He little perceives the skill of the throne-succession document in introducing narrative elements, creating tension and dramatic effect. He loses much of the element of subtle irony in this document’s way of resolving the rivalry between various contenders for the throne. All that seems to disturb a simplistic image of David’s reign is assigned to Dtr, which is of course much too late to be taken as the original, creative author of this particular material.¹²

Simply put, in their rush to dissect the text into two hypothetical “anti-Solomonic” and “pro-Solomonic” sources, these scholars have failed to consider that perhaps the Succession Narrative is, in fact, a work of literary artistry by a single author, that contains *both* “pro” and “anti” points of view regarding Solomon, and thus invites the reader to live within that tension in the story.

This leads us to the final challenge to not only Rost’s view, but also the view of the redaction scholars. David Gunn suggests the entire

10. Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel*, 236.

11. *Ibid.*

12. DeVries, *1 Kings*, 8–9.

Succession Narrative, as extending from 2 Sam 2 to 1 Kgs 2, should be regarded first and foremost as a “story in the sense of a work of art and entertainment.”¹³ Dietrich questions the extension of the beginning of the Succession Narrative from 1 Sam 9 to 2 Sam 2, on the grounds that such a narrative could hardly retain the title of “Succession Narrative,” and states, “[i]n this case, we would not be dealing with two separate narratives, a succession narrative and a narrative of David’s rise, but one unified Davidic narrative.”¹⁴ To that observation, we say that if individual passages like that of Joab’s killing of Abner in 2 Sam 3 can be shown to share a vital literary connection to those passages within the traditional Succession Narrative, then perhaps it is best to reconsider the validity of the traditionally-held division Dietrich has mentioned. Perhaps it is a unified narrative after all.

In any case, for lack of a better title, Gunn deems the Succession Narrative as *serious* entertainment; he does not go so far as to call it “fiction.”¹⁵ Neither does he deny the essential historical foundation for these stories.¹⁶ His fundamental point is that what we have is first and foremost *a story*, and therefore we should read and interpret it in the same way we would read and interpret any work of literature, reading the text closely and taking our interpretive cues from clues that are in the actual text. To pigeonhole the text in neat categories like “political propaganda” or “morality tale,” potentially shuts oneself off from layers of literary play and interpretive meaning within the text. Yet the ambiguities and tensions in the text may be there for a reason.¹⁷ Therefore, as Gunn states, “[w]hy must we be looking for neat ‘solutions’ which ‘do away with’ the tensions? Why should the text be expected to be simply and neatly ‘pro’ anyone?”¹⁸

13. Gunn, *The Story of David*, 38.

14. Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel*, 240.

15. “It is in this latter sense that I would speak of our narrative as a work of art and *serious* entertainment. But if the purpose of the story is serious entertainment, there is no clear indication that the author regarded the work as one of fiction” (Gunn, *The Story of David*, 61).

16. “...the narrative is *not* best described as history writing. Perhaps I should add here, lest I be misunderstood, that this does not amount to a blanket denial of the historicity of the events described in the story” (Gunn, *The Story of David*, 21).

17. “It is quite possible that an author might be content to leave us with a great deal of ambiguity in his presentation of characters even to the extent of leaving a large question mark hanging over the nature of God’s activity” (Gunn, *The Story of David*, 25).

18 Gunn, *The Story of David*, 25.

What we have before us, therefore, in 1 Kgs 1–2, 2 Sam 3, and 2 Sam 20, are three narratives within a much larger unified narrative that reveal the bloody and sordid mess of politics and warfare, where the ability to judge between good and evil actions is often hampered by one’s limited point of view, and where the legitimacy of certain acts seems to lie in the eye of the beholder. Yet far from being mired in postmodern moral relativism, the story of Solomon’s execution of Joab, like the stories of the killings of Abner and Amasa to which it refers, displays a clear faith in a God who, in the midst of the ignorance and sin of deeply flawed human beings, still works His will.

A PRELIMINARY GLANCE AT SOLOMON’S REASONS FOR THE EXECUTION OF JOAB

The essential question surrounding Solomon’s execution of Joab is, “Was this execution justified in the eyes of YHWH, or was it simply a blood-thirsty act on the part of Solomon in order to wipe out any potential threats?” There are a number of factors in 1 Kgs 1–2 that need to be considered when answering this question. First, there is the *official* reason, supposedly given by David on his deathbed (1 Kgs 2:5–6), and reiterated by Solomon when he commanded Benaiah to strike Joab down in the sanctuary (1 Kgs 2:31–33): Joab must receive the retribution of YHWH for his unjust murders of Abner and Amasa. If they were, in fact, unjust, this would certainly seem to justify Solomon’s actions. The problem, of course, is that it is not so clear that they were unjust. Although the claim is that Joab killed these men “in peace time,” Eschelbach disagrees. He states, “This is clearly exaggeration which leads the reader to consider the opposite . . . the blood of Abner and Amasa was hardly innocent nor were their deaths without cause.”¹⁹

A second factor is the *implied* reason for Joab’s execution. One cannot help but notice that Joab’s murder comes on the heels of Adonijah’s request for Abishag, which Solomon sees as a treasonous act punishable by death. The implication, therefore, is that since both Joab and Abiathar had originally supported Adonijah’s claim to the throne, both were equally suspect of treason along with Adonijah. If Adonijah really was attempting to take the throne, it would be understandable to suspect Joab and Abiathar as being co-conspirators. And if that were true, then it would seem that Solomon’s actions would be justified as well.

19. Michael A. Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David? A Literary Study of the Importance of Joab’s Character in Relation to David* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 63.

A third factor to consider, though, is found specifically in Solomon's speech to Benaiah (1 Kgs 2:31–33). When told by Benaiah that Joab refused to leave the altar in the tent of YHWH, Solomon not only orders Benaiah to go into the tent of YHWH and kill Joab, but he also reiterates and expands upon what David had told him in 1 Kgs 2:5–6. Solomon says that striking down Joab would “take away from me and from my father's house *the guilt for the blood that Joab shed without cause*” (1 Kgs 2:31). He then emphasizes David's innocence regarding Joab's killings of Abner and Amasa by saying, “the LORD will bring back his bloody deeds on his own head, because, *without the knowledge of my father David*, he attacked and killed with the sword two men more righteous and better than himself” (1 Kgs 2:32 NRSV). He concludes his speech by further distancing himself and his father David from Joab by saying “So shall their blood come back on the head of Joab and on the head of his descendants forever; but to David, and to his descendants, and to his house, and to his throne, there shall be peace from the LORD forevermore” (1 Kgs 2:33 NRSV).

Such an emphasis on Joab's killing of Abner and Amasa, though, seems rather odd. After all, if Joab was truly conspiring with Adonijah, why is this official reason even necessary? Treason is a pretty justifiable reason for execution. Why the need for putting forth Joab's killing of Abner and Amasa as the reason for Joab's execution? As Eschelbach asks, if those actions were so heinous, “. . . why hadn't David dealt with Joab earlier? Why was it that only after Joab appeared in support of Adonijah that he had to die?”²⁰

Despite these understandable suspicions of Solomon's justification for killing Joab, we must realize that what Solomon's speech reveals is that Joab's execution was not simply because he had killed two innocent men. It reveals that Joab's murders of Abner and Amasa had a much deeper impact on David's reign than one might have originally thought. If one reads the entirety of 2 Sam, one finds that the “peace and unity” of David's kingdom was largely a myth.²¹ Whether it was his battles with Ishbaal, or the rebellions of both his son Absalom and Sheba son of Bichri, turmoil and war characterized David's reign. And, not surprisingly, as Solomon's speech indicates, much of that turmoil was brought on by the actions of Joab himself. Therefore, before we come to a conclusion regarding 1 Kgs 1–2, we should first look more closely through the two windows that the author of 1 Kgs 1–2 opens for us: the

20. Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David?*, 63.

21. “I question David's description of this time being one of peace. The kingdom had been continually unsettled, full of rebellious plots inside and outside of David's house” (Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David?*, 64).

events surrounding Joab's murder of Abner in 2 Sam 3:6–37, and the events surrounding Joab's murder of Amasa in 2 Sam 20:1–12. As we will see, all three episodes share a surprising number of narrative parallels.

2 SAMUEL 3:6–37: JOAB'S MURDER OF ABNER

In order to understand the controversy surrounding Joab's murder of Abner, one must first understand the back-story that leads up to the murder: Abner originally supported Ishbaal and the House of Saul (2 Sam 2:7–10); Abner killed Joab's brother Asahel in an early battle with David's men (2 Sam 2:19–23). Later, Abner "made himself strong in the House of Saul" and "went into" Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines. Ishbaal then essentially accused him of treason (2 Sam 3:6–7). Although Abner vehemently denied the charge of treason, he did not ever deny going into Rizpah. Nevertheless, he was so outraged at Ishbaal that he declared he would switch his allegiance (and the power of the northern army of Israel) to David (2 Sam 3:8–10). Abner then met with David and promised to "rally all of Israel" to David (2 Sam 3:12–21).

With these things in mind, we can now better assess Joab's murder of Abner. Although David clearly believed Abner, we are told that Joab did not. In fact, he tells David that Abner came to deceive him, and to learn of David's movements (2 Sam 3:24–25). In other words, we are told that Joab suspected Abner of *political treachery*. Surprisingly though, when Joab murdered Abner without David's knowledge only a few verses later, we are told that Abner died for the killing of Joab's brother Asahel, the clear implication being that Joab killed Abner out of a *personal sense of revenge* (2 Sam 3:26–27). The reader is thus left with *two* reasons for the murder of Abner—one political, one personal—and the text does not definitively resolve the tension. Joab's *stated* reason in 2 Sam 3:24–25 is that Abner is deceiving David; while David's *stated* reaction to Joab's murder of Abner was that Joab did it out of revenge. Which one should we believe? This "double vision" forces the reader to raise further questions of perception concerning a number of other key events in 2 Sam 3.

First, one must wonder whether or not Abner's going into Rizpah really was an act of treason. Immediately before we are told that Abner went into Rizpah, we are told that "Abner was making himself strong in the House of Saul" (2 Sam 3:6). When one considers that in that culture "a king's harem may become a trophy for his challenger or successor,"²² one must certainly suspect that Abner's actions toward Rizpah were a grasp

22. Seow, "I and II Kings," 32.

for power. After all, one only has to read David's demand in 2 Sam 3:13 to have his wife Michal, Saul's daughter, delivered to him before any deal is struck between David and Abner. Why would David want Michal back as his wife, if for nothing else than as a way to legitimize his claim to the throne of Israel?²³ In any case, even though Abner's denial of acting treacherously toward Ishbaal suggests that his "going into" Rizpah was not a grasp for power, it is clear that the perception was there.

Second, in light of Abner's questionable actions concerning Rizpah, as well as the fact that he was, after all, the commander of Ishbaal's army, we must ask: "Did Joab really think Abner was deceiving David, or was Joab's murder of Abner simply a cold-blooded act of revenge?" Now although the biblical text *states* Joab's murder of Abner was an act of revenge, it also states that Joab *perceived* that Abner was deceiving David. While there is no doubt Abner's killing of Asahel colored Joab's suspicion of Abner, one still must conclude that Joab's suspicion was legitimately felt. If Joab had simply been bent on seeking revenge on Abner, why had he stopped pursuing Abner in 2 Sam 2:26–28?

Furthermore, this causes us to read David's words to Solomon in a different light. David said that Joab killed Abner and Amasa "in peace time" (1 Kgs 2:5). Though David believed Abner, and received him in peace, if Joab saw Abner's actions as an act of deceit in the midst of David's war with Ishbaal, Joab would not have seen his murder of Abner as being "in peace time." As Gunn has said, "[p]erhaps . . . from Joab's perspective the incident is merely an extension of the battle at Gibeon."²⁴ This by no means justifies his going against his own king's wishes, but it does point to the fact that if one *perceives* that someone's actions are deceitful, it makes it that much easier to justify action against that person.

Third, what are we to make of David's public mourning of Abner and his cursing of Joab (2 Sam 3:28–39)? There is nothing in the text that suggests David secretly wanted Joab to kill Abner, so we must believe that David was legitimately upset over Joab's actions. But we must also consider that David's concerns were not only personal, but political as well. Politically speaking, it seemed that Abner was about to unite all of Israel under David. Therefore, from David's perspective, his murder upset those plans, and potentially cast David in a bad light in the eyes of Israel. From Joab's perspective though, he no doubt thought that his murder of Abner, while avenging his brother, would also be the fatal blow against the House of Saul.

23. "With Michal in his house again, David could be almost certain of the support of the northern tribes" (Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David?*, 25).

24. Gunn, *The Story of David*, 96.

And in fact it was. 2 Sam 4 tells us that when Ishbaal, along with Israel, heard that Abner had been killed, their courage failed. This led to Ishbaal's assassination, which in turn paved the way for David's rise to power over all Israel and Judah. We can only speculate about what would have happened if Abner had lived. Since he was killed by Joab, the questions concerning his trustworthiness and loyalty can never be answered. We have no way of determining whether or not David's faith in Abner was a wise political move. What we do know, though, is that Joab's murder of Abner (a) went against the wishes of David, (b) paved the way for David's rise to power over all of Israel, but (c) also created a dangerous powder keg for David. The real power behind Ishbaal had been murdered by David's commander while visiting David under the promise of safe passage. Therefore, David's public mourning for Abner and his public cursing of Joab served an obvious political purpose.

Evidently, it paid off, for 2 Sam 3:37 tells us that "all the people and all Israel understood that day that the king had no part in the killing of Abner son of Ner." Nevertheless, the severity of David's curse on Joab clearly marks a rift between the two men at the beginning of David's reign. Although they held to the same political goals, this instance would only be the first of many where David and Joab butted heads on how to run the kingdom. For now though, we must state two key points concerning Abner that will have ramifications for our assessment of Solomon's execution of Joab. First, Joab's murder of Amasa clearly went against David's wishes, and clearly caused friction between the two men. Second, the justification, or lack thereof, of Abner's murder clearly depends on whose perspective one takes. If Joab was correct in suspecting Abner (and indeed Abner's incident with Rizpah does raise questions about his trustworthiness), then he did David a great service by killing Abner. If, though, David was correct in trusting Abner (yet we will never know if he was, since Abner was killed), and accusing Joab of murdering Abner out of revenge, then Joab deserved David's curse.

2 SAMUEL 20:1–12: JOAB'S MURDER OF AMASA

A very similar situation can be seen concerning Joab's murder of Amasa. Like Abner, Amasa was the commander of the army of David's rival, in this case his own son Absalom (2 Sam 17:25). After entering Jerusalem with his army, Absalom "went into David's concubines in a clear attempt to lay claim to David's kingdom (2 Sam 16:20–22). Eventually, though, Joab killed Absalom in battle, despite the explicit orders by David not to do so (2 Sam 18:5, 10–15).

Unlike the events surrounding Abner, where Abner may very well have been trustworthy, one has to side with Joab's decision to kill

Absalom, for Absalom was an obvious traitor, and thus that suspicion would undoubtedly be carried over to Amasa. Nevertheless, one sees once again that Joab and David had different ideas of how to run a kingdom and how to deal with political threats. In fact, Joab went so far as to threaten David with desertion of himself and the army if David continued to mourn for Absalom and shame the very people who saved his life (2 Sam 19:5–7). Though David heeded Joab’s warning, he still found a way to get back at Joab. Once Absalom’s rebellion was crushed, David appointed Amasa as his commander and essentially fired Joab in an attempt to win back Judah. With Abner, Joab received a curse from David. Now with Absalom, Joab received a pink slip.

Amasa’s subsequent actions in 2 Sam 20, though, cause the reader to wonder if this was the wisest move on David’s part. For when Sheba began his revolt in northern Israel, David called upon Amasa to assemble the men of Judah in order to crush this revolt. Amasa, though, delayed to carry out David’s order (2 Sam 20:5). The obvious question is, “Why?” We are not told. Yet, when one considers that Amasa was the commander of the traitor Absalom’s army, one has to think that perhaps Amasa’s true loyalties were with Sheba. After all, immediately after we are told that Amasa delayed on David’s orders, we are told that David tells Abishai, “Now Sheba son of Bichri will do us more harm than Absalom” (2 Sam 20:6). Does this betray the fact that David now suspected Amasa of treason, or that David was disappointed in the job Amasa was doing?

Either way, be it a traitor or an inept commander, Amasa is not portrayed in a positive light. The fact that Joab found and murdered him in Gibeon, a city in Benjaminite territory, the homeland of Saul, the place where Sheba’s rebellion first broke out, raise further suspicions about Amasa’s loyalty to David. Such doubts have been raised by other scholars as well.²⁵

Consequently, one must ask, “Did Joab kill Amasa because he saw he was a traitor to David, or because he was jealous that Amasa had taken his place as commander over David’s army?” Again, the biblical text does not tell us either way. If nothing else, it seems quite clear that David’s appointment of Amasa was a political mistake and that he was better off with Joab as his commander. The fact that 2 Sam 20 does not tell us that David was upset with Joab for his killing of Amasa seems to imply that David was relieved Amasa was out of the way. The fact that

25. Harry Hagan, “Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Samuel 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2.” *Bib* 60 (1979): 301–26; Martin A. Cohen, “The Rebellions during the Reign of David: An Inquiry into Social Dynamics in Ancient Israel,” in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography, History, and Literature in Honor of I. E. Kiev* (ed. Charles Berlin; New York: KTAV, 1971), 91–112.

Joab is reinstated as David's commander (2 Sam 20:23) seems to indicate David's approval of Joab's actions.²⁶

On the other hand, one could read 2 Sam 20:11, where Joab's man takes his stand by Amasa's corpse and urges, "[w]hoever favors Joab, and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab," and make a case that Joab had the army's loyalty behind him after his murder of Amasa. Consequently, David saw that he was in no position to challenge Joab, and was essentially forced to retain him as commander. Again, the biblical text does not spell the reasons out for us. The fact that Amasa's murder is part of David and Solomon's charge against Joab seems to imply this second perspective though. In any case, it does not take much to see that Amasa's death would have created a certain amount of resentment among some of his own followers toward David, and thus, as with Abner, caused later problems for David.

INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF 2 SAMUEL 3 AND 20

Based on what we have seen concerning Joab's murder of Abner and Amasa, we have seen a similar pattern that should shed light on Solomon's execution of Joab in 1 Kgs 2. Both Abner and Amasa had been commanders of David's rivals, and in 2 Sam 3 and 20, there were actions with concubines or wives that had clear political implications. Although both Abner and Amasa had seemingly made peace with David, a cloud of suspicion and disloyalty still hung over both men. As Walsh has stated, "[i]n both cases Joab may have had a legitimate political mistrust of his victim. But he also had strong personal reasons for doing away with them,"²⁷ namely revenge for his brother's death in Abner's case, and jealousy over losing his job in Amasa's case. Joab also personally benefited in both cases. Abner could have very well been appointed the commander of David's army, and therefore Joab's murder of Abner insured his own appointment. Similarly, Joab's murder of Amasa allowed him to regain his original post as commander over David's army. In both cases, David's political power was strengthened. Because of Joab's actions, Israel was demoralized with Abner's death

26 "This appointment by David is clearly unjust toward Joab and the fact that Joab killed him with impunity argues that Joab's hostility was justified. Joab's actions find further justification in taking seriously the narrator's comments about Amasa's delay in dealing with Sheba's revolt. David himself bore witness to Amasa's failure since he appointed Abishai to do what Amasa should have already done" (Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David?*, 34).

27. Walsh, *1 Kings*, 41.

and Sheba's rebellion was crushed. As J. W. Weisselius has noticed, whether David approved or not, the fact was Joab's questionable actions are what established David in the first place.²⁸

Nevertheless, despite Joab's fierce loyalty toward David, these two events show that he would do what he thought was best for David, even if it meant defying David's own wishes. As Frank H. Polak states, "Joab embodies the best interests of David's kingdom, even though he also acts without restraint for his own personal good, even when his actions counter David's wishes and explicit orders."²⁹ From Joab's perspective, his actions were not only personally expedient, but also politically beneficial to David. At the same time, it is easy to see that Joab's murders of Abner and Amasa were sparks in what were already volatile political situations. Therefore, from David's perspective, Joab's actions not only went against his wishes, they also ended up causing more trouble for David in the long run, for it caused resentment and distrust among David's opponents in Israel. Nevertheless, Joab had the power of the army behind him, and he was going to solidify David's reign the way he saw fit, regardless of the fact that his way might occasionally go against the wishes of the very king for whom he was working.

1 KINGS 1–2: SOLOMON'S EXECUTION OF JOAB

With a clear understanding of Joab's murders of both Abner and Amasa, we are now in a better position to assess Solomon's execution of Joab in 1 Kgs 1–2. 1 Kgs 1 states that Joab, along with Abiathar, had supported Adonijah's bid for the throne. One can debate whether Adonijah's action was a subversive act, or whether it was a reasonable assumption, given that Adonijah was, after all, the eldest son of David. For our purposes, though, we must realize that when all was said and done, Joab had backed the wrong horse. Solomon had ended up on the throne, and Joab ironically found himself in a position similar to Abner and Amasa. He was now the man who had supported the rival of Israel's king, and his loyalty to Israel's king would now be held in suspicion. Despite his loyalty to David in the past, this one act of supporting Adonijah no doubt called into question his loyalty to Solomon.

28. J. W. Wesselius, "Joab's Death and the Central Theme of the Succession Narrative," *VT* 15 (1990), 338.

29. Frank H. Polak, "Joab and David in Double Vision." *Bib* 2 (2001), 266.

Just as in the cases of Abner and Amasa, the initial conflict had seemingly been resolved, and Adonijah, along with Joab and Abiathar, was allowed to live. Yet when Adonijah asked for Abishag the Shunnamite, Solomon's suspicions were raised regarding Adonijah's loyalty: was Adonijah's asking for Abishag an act of treason? If seen in light of Abner's going into Rizpah, one would be tempted to say that Adonijah was not committing treason and that both Adonijah's and Joab's murders, as well as Abiathar's exile, were truly reprehensible acts on the part of Solomon.

Yet if seen in light of Absalom, the man who appointed Amasa, one would definitely interpret Adonijah's request as treason. Furthermore, if Adonijah truly was making an attempt at the throne, it would be foolish to think he was acting on his own. One man having sex with one of the former king's concubines will not be worth much if that man does not have the backing of a powerful commander and an influential priest. Therefore, Solomon's actions would be justified after all. One must, therefore, question Iain Provan when he says, "[t]here is no evidence . . . that Abiathar and Joab had anything to do with Adonijah's initiative. We do not know whether they did or not. We do know, however, that Solomon has been waiting for the right moment to kill Joab, and Adonijah gives him his opportunity. Joab and Abiathar are pronounced guilty by association."³⁰ Although it is true that we do not know for certain if Abiathar and Joab were co-conspirators with Adonijah—for that matter it is even questionable as to whether or not Adonijah was actually committing treason—Provan's depiction of Solomon as the blood-thirsty villain and Joab as an innocent victim may be going further than the text allows.

In any case, we can be certain of how the execution of Joab was explained by Solomon. He believed that Adonijah, Abiathar, and Joab were plotting to overthrow him, and thus had them punished for treason. In Joab's case, though, Solomon's speech emphasizes that YHWH was returning the blood of Abner and Amasa onto the head of Joab. There is one thing we must be clear on: the charge that led to Joab's execution was one of treason. He was not officially being killed for two questionable murders he committed early in David's reign. In this respect, Wesselius is wrong in his assessment that "the grounds which they [David and Solomon] mentioned for condemning Joab to death were weak."³¹

Joab was executed because he was suspected of treason. The murders of Abner and Amasa were further justifications for it, but they

30. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 38.

31. Wesselius, "Joab's Death," 338.

were not the charges that led to his execution. From Solomon's point of view, Joab's brutal actions towards David's enemies in Israel had made him look bad, and therefore had detrimental political ramifications throughout his reign. It was therefore imperative that Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, clear David from any suspicion of murdering Abner, the commander of northern Israel who originally supported Ishbaal, and Amasa, the Judean commander of Absalom's army, in order to try to bring peace to a kingdom that had been on the brink of chaos for over forty years. In a very pragmatic way, one can see that executing Joab could very well satisfy certain northern factions and southern factions who were resistant to the Davidic House precisely because of what was perceived to be unjust murders of their former commanders. Solomon's decision to execute Joab, in the sanctuary nonetheless, though it may seem bloody to us, was to a certain extent *politically* justified, especially if Joab was indeed involved in a plot with Adonijah and Abiathar to overthrow Solomon.

Ultimately, the blood Joab shed came back on his head. He was killed for the very same suspicions he held against Abner and Amasa. In all three cases, there was the perception of treason and disloyalty that we will never be able either to discount or verify, as well as an obvious political and personal benefit for the murderer in each case. Nevertheless, the question of loyalty, and thus the legitimacy of each murder, ultimately remains unanswered and unanswerable. One thing is certain, though: Joab was eventually dealt with in the exact way that he had acted toward Abner and Amasa. As Provan has stated, "Joab had lived by the sword, killing . . . two army commanders who happened to be his professional rivals. Now he dies by the sword and is immediately replaced by his killer as commander of the army."³² Gunn, too, sees the poetic justice in Joab's death, which he describes as "a fitting one for a man who epitomized the use of violent means in the cause of political expediency and who happens now to be on the losing side, the story as it concerns him having come full circle."³³ Eschelbach puts it this way: "The narrator forces the reader to consider the justice of Joab's fate as irony. The loyal general who protected the lives of many against traitors now receives the condemnation of a traitor and has no one to protect him."³⁴ Ultimately, Joab eventually got what he gave out.

32. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 39.

33. Gunn, *The Story of David*, 107.

34. Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David?* 64.

CONCLUSIONS

In the realm of politics and warfare, there are rarely ever black and white issues. One man's hero is another man's war criminal, and those assessments are often based on incomplete information. The fascinating thing about the account of Solomon's execution of Joab (along with the accounts of Joab's murders of Abner and Amasa) is that the biblical text does not attempt to cover over those informational gaps and give a whitewashed version of the events in question. Instead of taking the perspective of an omniscient narrator, the text chooses to relate these episodes from a limited perspective, thus leaving the reader to wrestle with the messy and difficult decisions that faced David, Joab, and Solomon.

What the account of Solomon's execution of Joab reveals is that the justification for the execution, as well as the murders of Abner and Amasa, entirely depended upon the perspective of the character in question. Scholars are rightly suspicious of Solomon's execution of Joab, but they should be wary of condemning him.³⁵ The politics of warfare will always be an ugly business, and in the larger scheme of things, no one is completely free from bloodguilt in those kinds of situations. Such seems to be the testimony of 1 Kgs 1–2.

One thing is certain, though. All three episodes discussed in this article were written in such a way as to invite the reader to ask, "What if?" If Joab had not killed Abner, and if Abner was deceiving David, would it have led to more bloodshed? If Joab had not killed Amasa, and if Amasa really was a traitor, would it have led to more bloodshed? If Solomon had not killed Joab, and if Joab really was trying to overthrow Solomon, would it have led to more bloodshed? Conversely, if Joab had not killed Abner and Amasa, and both men really were trustworthy, would they have helped bring peace and unity to the kingdom?

These questions simply cannot be answered, though, because ultimately they are speculative. The author instead has chosen to display the confusing and clouded reality that surrounded Solomon's rise to the throne. By means of analogy, we can look at the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis. What would happen if Israel pulled completely out of the occupied territories? One might hope that this would bring peace to the region, but at the same time, one would be justified in worrying that the Hamas world would seize the opportunity to try to eliminate the nation of Israel. At the same time, what would happen if Israel decided to launch a full-scale offensive against the Gaza Strip and the West Bank

35. For that matter, the same goes for Joab. As Gunn states, Joab "is no more villain than he is hero. The fraudulent blacks and whites against which he is finally pictured serve only to highlight the greyness of those who do the picturing" (*The Story of David*, 108).

and try to completely wipe out Hamas? Some might think this would solve the problem once and for all, but most would probably think it would spark a greater war with the Arab world. Either decision could be disastrous. In reality, it is difficult to completely trust the leaders on either side in the conflict, for both have political agendas and personal motives that often cannot be distinguished from each other. Whatever each side does will be praised by some and condemned by others. In the real world, political decisions are rarely black and white. Such is the situation we see in Solomon's execution of Joab, as well as Joab's murders of Abner and Amasa, where personal agendas and political concerns seemed to intertwine into one.

In the end, we come back to the question as to whether or not Solomon's execution of Joab was justified. Should we agree with Seow when he states, "Solomon's actions—even if politically and legally justifiable—are morally reprehensible?"³⁶ Or does the biblical text even allow us to come to a conclusion either way? Iain Provan is quite correct to ask the question, "Is morality entirely a matter of technicalities?"³⁷ The answer is of course not. Yet it is quite easy to make moral judgments when one is watching from the sidelines. When one is right in the middle of a political and military crisis that can blow up at any given moment, the distinctions are not so clear. It seems that the biblical writer thought Joab's execution was justified, and that Joab's murders of Abner and Amasa were truly reprehensible. At the same time, though, the biblical writer is also honest enough to provide us with information to the contrary, and thus admitting his own limited perspective. The reader is left with a stark picture of reality, and a realization that although we may be forced to make decisions based on our own limited perspectives, and although those decisions may be praised by some and condemned by others, we must trust ourselves to the God who sees everything, and pray that we will be shown grace for any evil that may come about because of our ignorance.

Although 1 Kgs 1–2 attempts to make sense of the mess ironically called the "United Kingdom of Israel" and explain the sordid events that took place within it, perhaps its greatest achievement is that it paints a very realistic picture of that mess, and does not allow us to naively think that anyone involved was perfect and completely good and honorable. Therefore, we are challenged to extend a certain amount of grace to these characters, for if we were in their shoes, we would be forced to make those very same controversial decisions, and we would

36. Seow, "I and II Kings," 35.

37. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 40.

inevitably stand condemned by someone. We would inevitably find ourselves standing with blood on our hands before God himself, and hoping that God would extend His grace to us. Such is the ultimate lesson surrounding this most troubling account of Solomon's execution of Joab.

