



People of the Old Testament

David and Absalom

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2 Samuel 18: 24–end Luke 15: 11–20

What a way to hear David's unforgettable cry. The singular pain of his words alleviated and deepened and almost unbearably protracted by the beauty of Tomkins's music. And most importantly, shared: shared between several voices, shared with us who hear them. Earlier on we listened to the last lap of the story. We can see it portrayed in those two images from the Morgan Bible, reproduced in the centrefold of the Order of Service. The lower one shows David looking up to the watchman as they wait for news of the climactic battle. (Albeit the two runners have been replaced by knights on horseback.) On the right above we see Absalom hanging by his hair in a tree, while his mule canters demurely away, and his killer or killers stick three lances into him.

How does the story get to these two terrible moments? They are both scenes of suspense. When time slows down, and seems to stop. In the Old Testament telling, Absalom's fate hangs in the balance for several verses, while a nameless bystander tells David's general Joab that he's seen Absalom hanging in an oak-tree. Joab says 'why didn't you smite him? I'd have made it worth your while'. Mister anonymous says that no reward would be large enough because we all heard the king say, 'See that nobody touches the young man Absalom. Especially you, Joab and the other two generals.' Joab says to this nobody: 'stop wasting my time'. He takes three darts or stout sticks or spears and thrusts them into Absalom. Then a gang of ten young men join in. They throw the corpse into a pit and cover it with a great heap of stones. It is an ignominious end.

The shame of it is momentarily dissipated when the story pauses to tell us about the pillar that Absalom has raised for himself in his lifetime: 'for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance ... and it is called unto this day, Absalom's place'. But as the shades of Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Cecil Rhodes and Edward Colston will report, you can't always control what the future will make of your memory. Poor Absalom never enjoys even the temporary honour that they did. More than one tourist guide to Israel tells of the custom for passers-by to throw stones at Absalom's monument, and for parents to bring 'their unruly children to the site to teach them what became of a rebellious son'.¹

Because let's face it: Absalom is every father's worst nightmare. Not that David is every son's dream of a father. No: every son's dream of a father is the all-forgiving one in the parable of the prodigal son, who rushes out to meet the remorseful delinquent, greets him with a kiss, throws a big party, and mollifies his indignant elder brother. In fact, there *is* a reconciliation scene between David and Absalom – and a kiss – but it comes too early.

¹ Zev Vilnay, 'Pillar of Absalom', *The Guide to Israel* (Jerusalem: Hamakor Press, 1970), pp. 157–8.

Their story falls into two parts. The first Part is dominated by a tale of rape and revenge and rough justice. Absalom's beautiful sister Tamar has been raped by their brother Amnon, then brutally discarded. When he hears about it, Absalom is, as we like to say, conflicted. He's angry but he tells his sister to keep quiet: 'do not take it to heart'; 'regard not this thing'. Their father David is angry too. But the rapist Amnon is his first-born son, so neither father nor brother do anything. Meanwhile Tamar is desolate. This is not the patriarchy at its best.

But Absalom is not finished. For two years he simmers. Is he waiting for his father to act? Then Absalom takes the law into his own hands. He arranges a big feast for all the king's sons, plies Amnon with drink and has him murdered by his servants. It's all a bit mafia. Then everyone scarpers in haste, including Absalom, who flees into exile. What about King David, when he hears what all his sons have been up to? He mourns Amnon, but he gets used to it. After all, Absalom is not any old son (there are probably about 20 now in Jerusalem, that we know about). Absalom is special, the one his father loves most, the one he really misses: 'and the soul of king David longed to go forth unto Absalom'.

Three years pass before Absalom is persuaded to return from exile. His father does not rush out to throw his arms around him. He refuses to see him. Everyone *e/se* sees Absalom; everyone thinks he's beautiful. Especially his hair – yes, the hair that will get fatally caught in the oak tree. Another two years pass before Absalom insists on seeing his father and bullies Joab into arranging it – yes, the same Joab who will eventually murder or execute him. And so we reach the end of Part I with the stately scene in which son and father are formally reconciled. Save that David is not called the father but the king, the king, the king. He summons Absalom, who prostrates himself: 'and the king kissed Absalom'.

If only it had ended there. Because then the real trouble starts as Absalom starts currying favour with 'the people', gathering his forces in a parricidal conspiracy, preparing a coup. (The King James bible says that 'forty years' pass which seems unlikely; probably a mistake for four.) And then all hell breaks loose, as the world explodes into civil war. David flees; Absalom seizes Jerusalem. He makes a show of raping his father's wives. There are all kinds of dirty tricks, espionage, betrayal, and derring-do. Until it comes to a climax with the big battle in the wood of Ephraim, where 20,000 men are slaughtered in one day. We hear, mysteriously, that 'the wood devoured more people that day than the sword'. It certainly proves fatal to Absalom who gets caught in the tree and hangs there until Joab and his gang stab and club him to death. And then: someone has to break the news to his father David.

What *is* the news, the 'tidings'? After all, King David's forces have won a great battle. This is a cause for celebration. The messenger who reaches David first thinks that he brings good news, that 'All is well', that the rebellion has been crushed. But David has only one question: 'Is the young man Absalom safe?' This messenger lies and says he doesn't know. Then another slower messenger, who set off first but arrives second, breaks the news as gently as he can. And this unleashes the great final verse of this chapter, and David's cry of agony.

We talk of unconditional love, perhaps too easily. This is unconditional grief. These are words that his son will never hear, expressing a love that his father has never put into words. Time stops, or seems to. For David, for everyone who hears this cry, including us as readers and listeners, millennia later. David seeks privacy and solitude for his grief, in the roof-chamber over the gate. But he cannot wait, *it* cannot wait till he gets there. It spills out of him on the way, for everyone to hear.

Except that time does not stop. The story goes on. The day of victory turns into a day of national mourning until Joab, that man again, rebukes his lord and master. 'It's not all about *you!* You're a king as well as a father. Pull yourself together.' David complies; he resumes his seat in the gate, his public office, on show for all to see; he acknowledges and honours the servants and soldiers who have fought for him and saved his skin. For the story of David and Absalom, riveting as it is in its personal tragedy, involves many participants. As all tragedy does. There are the 20,000 men without names slain in the wood of Ephraim. There are the loved ones and families they leave behind. There are individuals with names and fates of their own, advisors and middlemen like Ahitophel and Hushai. There are the two messengers, Ahimaaz and Cushai. There is the nobody who finds Absalom hanging in a tree. There is Joab and his ten young thugs. And so on.

William Faulkner knew what he was doing when he conferred on his greatest novel the title *Absalom, Absalom!* When asked which came first, the title or the story, Faulkner claimed that they came together, but this wasn't true. His first thought for a title was 'Dark House'. Which is good, but nothing like as resonant as *Absalom, Absalom!* This is the cry that hangs over Faulkner's tragic portrayal of the American South, the obsession with patriarchal succession and heredity that dooms its inhabitants and compels all who are touched by it. Faulkner was right. The story of David and Absalom is endlessly compelling in its depiction of the rift between father and son, and its terrible consequences. It marks a limit at the other extreme from the parable of the Prodigal Son. And alternative visions of what fathers and sons can mean to each other. It is painful to remember the wonderful lament to which David himself was once inspired for Saul and Jonathan, father and son, swifter than eagles, stronger than lions – the father and son who were, David sings, 'lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided'.

'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!' No comfort, no consolation, no remedy. No wonder such moments in the Old Testament can make us turn towards the New.