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David's Lament for Abner (2 Samuel 3: 33-34)

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David's brief lament for Abner in 2 Sam 3:33-34 has presented commentators with something of a puzzle, not so much from any evident corruption of the text, as from its obscurity of meaning. The rendering of the Hebrew provided by the NRSV is typical of modern English translations:

The king lamented for Abner, saying:

“Should Abner die as a fool (גבל) dies?

Your hands were not bound (לא אסרות),

your feet were not fettered (לא לנושחים הנשור);

As one falls before the wicked

you have fallen.”

Then all the people wept over him again.

The differing views of modern commentators may be seen in the treatments of Smith and Keil at the end of the last century. The former, citing Prov 7:22-23 as justification, states that “the fool brings an early death upon himself by his reckless judgement...Abner had not even the honour of being made a prisoner of war, or of suffering death after being overwhelmed in battle.”⁶ Yet, being taken prisoner is certainly no honour, as the

⁶ H. P. Smith, *Samuel* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1899) 282, cf. P. K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB9; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984) 119.

story of Samson, who is bound in fetters ויאסרוהו בנחשתים –v.34, cf. Judg 16:21) and made sport of by his captors (Judg 16:25), demonstrates. By contrast, Keil understands the thrust of the dirge to be that Abner had not made himself guilty of a crime so as to die, like a prisoner, in chains. Rather, he was murdered.⁷

Keil is probably correct to point out the judicial element in the lament suggested by the imagery of chains and fetters. As far as David is concerned, Abner has committed no offence: just as Ishbaal in 2 Sam 4:11 is said to have been איש צדיק (“a righteous man”) murdered by אנשים רשעים (“wicked men”), Abner is said to have fallen before בני עולה (“unjust men” [NRSV: “the wicked”]). A consideration of the term נבל throws further light on this lament. One could read the opening of the lament as a reference to David's previous encounter with Nabal (נבל) in 1 Samuel 25 and translate accordingly “Should Abner have died like Nabal?” (as in fact does the Septuagint).⁸ While Nabal was not brought before David in chains and executed, several points of contact between the fates of Abner and Nabal suggest themselves and make an allusion seem likely.

When Nabal offends David by withholding from him the supplies which the latter demanded as payment for the “protection” given to his servants and livestock in the wilderness, David makes the claim that in so doing the rich landowner “has paid me evil (רעה) for good” (25:21) and sets out on a punitive expedition. Nabal's wife Abigail, however, successfully intercedes with David to prevent the slaughter of the men of her household (25:23-35) and the latter returns home. On hearing of the news of Nabal's death at the instigation of Yahweh, David declares with obvious satisfaction,

⁷ C. F. Keil, *Samuel* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1875; reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 304, cf. H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (OTL; London:SCM, 1964) 261-2.

⁸ On Tense of verb, see S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890) 193..

"Blessed be Yahweh who took my part in the case of Nabal's insult to me...*Yahweh has returned the evil of Nabal on his own head*"

(וַאֲחַר רַעַת נָבַל הַשִּׁיב יְהוָה בְּרָאשׁוֹ). (25:39)

This episode, which is interposed between David's dealings with Saul (1 Samuel 24, 26), is paradigmatic for the whole of the Story of David's Rise.⁹ The narrator of this tale is concerned to counter possible charges that David murdered his way to the throne by demonstrating how Yahweh himself removed the obstacles which stood in the way of David's advancement. Abigail prevents David's bloody revenge on Nabal not just with gifts, but with a warning to David about the consequences of incurring blood-guilt (1 Sam 25:30-32). With Nabal despatched shortly thereafter by Yahweh (25:38), it is a noticeably more self-assured David who can pass up the opportunity of killing Saul, his persecutor, saying, "As Yahweh lives, Yahweh will strike him down, or his day will come to die, or he will descend into battle and perish" (26:10).¹⁰ David's confidence in Yahweh proves well-founded, since not only Saul but three of his sons, including the heir-apparent Jonathan, will subsequently die in the battle on Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31).

Many commentators likewise ascribe the deaths of Abner and Ishbaal to Yahweh, and indeed it is difficult not to feel that such is the case.¹¹ However, this is not stated explicitly by David as we find with Nabal and Saul. Rather, David stresses the inappropriateness of their fate: Abner has fallen before "unjust men" and Ishbaal is likewise "a righteous man" slain by "wicked men." Though David mourns Saul and executes the Amalekite who claims to have dealt

⁹ R. P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ A few, such as N. P. Lemche ("David's Rise," *JSOT* 10 [1978] 2-25) and J. C. VanderKam ("Davidic Complicity in the deaths of Abner and Eshbaal," *JBL* 99 [1980] 521-539) see David rather than Yahweh as the "grey eminence" behind these killings.

Israel's king the fatal blow, he does not extol his opponent's righteousness in the way that he does with Abner and Ishbaal.

David's lament therefore makes a contrast between the fates of Nabal and Abner rather than a comparison. The former is introduced to the reader as "harsh and an evildoer" (1-קשה ורע מעללים) (1 Sam 25:3). He sought to hinder David's progress and was struck down by Yahweh for this "crime." The latter had entered into an alliance with David (2 Sam 3:12-13) and is struck down not by Yahweh, but by the "harsh" (קשים) sons of Zeruiah, led by the "evildoer" (עשה הרעה) Joab (3:39).¹²

The answer to the question, "Should Abner have died like Nabal?" is negative. The judicial imagery of fetters and shackles in David's lament underlines the fact that Abner had not followed the path of Nabal in continuing his resistance to David, and thereby exposed himself to a deserved punishment. Rather, it is Abner's killers who have become like Nabal by their action. The parallel thereby created between the murderers of Abner and David's former adversary is heightened by David's wish that Joab suffer the appropriate consequences for the killing (2 Sam 3:29) as did Nabal for his attempt to oppose David (1-רעה נבל השיב יהוה בראשו) (1 Sam 25:39). It may fairly be said that David laments not just the death of Abner, but a world in which the reins of fate may prove as slippery for him as they did for the Israelite general.

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¹² The only other person in the story of David's Rise of whom the terms קשה and רעה are used in close proximity is Saul (1 Sam 20, 7, 9, 13 [רעה], 10 [קשה]). Abigail's words in 1 Sam 25:26, "let your enemies and all who intend harm (רעה) to my lord be like Nabal (נבאל)" prepare the reader psychologically for the death of Saul, who lives and dies like Nabal (cf. D. M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* [JSOTS 14; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980] 96-103; R. P. Gordon, "David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24-26," *TB* 31 [1980] 37-64).