

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

his warnings, heedless as he preached to them of "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." They came and listened to it all as a performance, admiring skill, language, intonation. He was unto them as "the singer of a pleasant song, playing well upon an instrument," and that was all. Like all who have shared in any measure in the prophetic spirit, Ezekiel had learnt how hollow and unsatisfying was that form of praise and popularity: "They hear thy words, but do them not." The prophet must have written those words as with a profound sense of failure and disappointment. To feel that he had no influence for good even among those with whom he dwelt, that he had to be satisfied with compliments and a vague unsympathizing admiration, this must have been harder to bear even than the greatest personal sorrow, or the calamities that fell upon the holy and beautiful city in which he had lived. And therefore it was, we may believe, that the next word of the Lord which came to him, that against the shepherds of Israel, held out the promise of a brighter day, when the people should know their teachers, and the true Shepherd should guide out and seek the sheep that had been lost.

E. H. PLUMPTRE.

---

*ABSALOM.*

2 SAMUEL xiv. 25.

ST. PAUL divides the whole human race into what, for want of more exact equivalents for his Greek epithets, we are compelled to call—"natural" men and "spiritual" men. By "the natural man" he means man unmoralised—men who are animated and ruled by the soul which they possess in common with the animal tribes, men who walk after the

flesh, who care most for a sensuous activity, indulgence, enjoyment. By "the spiritual man" he means moralised man—men who walk by the reason and conscience by which they are differentiated from the brute and raised above him, men who care most for truth, righteousness, love.

To one of these two classes we and all men belong; and whichever the class in which we are ranged, we are apt to judge men of the other class harshly and unfairly. But the Bible is fair to both, *as if it really did come from God*, the Maker and Lover of all men. A revelation of spiritual things, we expect to meet spiritual men in it, and to see *them* made much of: and our expectation is fulfilled. The Bible leaves us in no kind of doubt as to the sort of man it prefers and approves, no doubt as to what manner of men it would have us to be. And yet it is far more just than we are to the kind of man it dislikes and condemns. It paints no monsters of utter and impossible wickedness, as our secular historians and dramatists do. It brands no natural and redeeming virtues as "splendid sins"—a phrase not unknown to some of our theologians. On the contrary, it often depicts the natural man so fairly, handles him so gently, if not lovingly, that the world—which has no time for deep research or nice distinctions, which hates to be set down to a complicated problem, and which certainly has no prejudice for spirituality—deceived by a justice so unlike its own, pronounces an opposite verdict to that to which the Bible would lead it, and in its rough and ready way prefers Esau, for instance, to Jacob, the "frank and fearless hunter" to "the timid treacherous shepherd," not pausing to consider how far these epithets are deserved, or how gravely they need to be qualified.

If no such verdict has been recorded of Absalom, *that* is not because the Bible has failed to say or to suggest all that could be said in his favour, or in excuse for him. Of him,

too, it speaks as if it loved him; not only lingering with admiration on the details of his superb personal beauty, but reminding us, if only we have eyes to see and hearts to understand, of the taints in his blood, the defects of his training, the special and strong temptations to which he was exposed. Even after his full criminality has been developed and avenged, it moves us to pity and ruth for him if only by the splendid epitaph it hangs over his dishonoured grave, in the piercing cry of unutterable love which rent David's heart, "O Absalom, my son, my son! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The leading events of his brief and tragic career are familiar to all English-speaking men:—the foul wrong inflicted on his beautiful sister Tamar, by Amnon, her half-brother and the heir to the throne; Absalom's dreadful revenge for this dreadful crime, which David had failed to punish, after brooding over it for two years; his banishment for three years to the Syrian court of Geshur, and from his father's presence for two years even after David had been persuaded to "fetch home his banished" son; the rebellion which he fomented and led, and the shocking end to which it conducted him, after an intoxicating moment of success. It is no part of my present purpose to narrate or expound these events. I aim simply at such a study of his character as shall make him real and vital to us, a possible man, not an impossible monster; a magnificent specimen of the natural man even, stained by many faults, and by more than one great because deliberate crime, yet not *suddenly* becoming vile, nor a sinner above all the men of his time; but one whose crimes were in some sort a consequence of his conditions and gifts, a natural development of his inherited temperament, his defective training, and of the wrongs he had to endure.

No thoughtful man who meditates on what he reads,

and who in any measure possesses the Spirit of Him who "makes large allowance for us all," can well fail to seize the hints of excuse which the Sacred Narrative implies rather than expresses, the pleas in arrest of a too severe judgment which it suggests, since they lie on its very surface. Absalom, he might say, was the son of David, and David was by no means immaculate on the fleshly side; the natural man was strong in him, though, as a rule, the spiritual man prevailed. He was also the son of Maacah, a Syrian princess, who, if she were like other Syrian princesses, held certain forms of vice and bloodshed to be acceptable rites of worship, well-pleasing in the sight of Heaven. He, therefore, derived taints of blood, proclivities to evil, from both his parents. And there was little, apparently, in his early training to disinfect his blood, or even to restrain and teach him to restrain its wild unruly impulses. David had many children, by many wives and many concubines: and these children seem to have been left to such training as their several mothers could give them, each of whom appears to have lived, with her children, in her own separate apartment, if not in her own separate house. What good lessons, what lessons of self-culture and self-control, was a lad likely to learn who was brought up amidst the trivial gossip, the effeminating luxuries, the petty rivalries, jealousies, and crossing ambitions of an Oriental harem, most of the inmates of which were of foreign extraction and pagan habits?

Untrained, except in self-admiration and self-indulgence, imperious, ambitious, quick to take offence, slow to forgive, hot with the riot of youthful blood, the young man—so fathered, so mothered, so brought up—is suddenly flung upon the world, and exposed to all the temptations of a court in which the Uriah and Bathsheba scandal is being discussed in all its forms and incidents. And the first grave adventure he meets in it is the intolerable misery

and shame inflicted on his sister by the heir to the throne! Will not the King avenge a crime so dreadful? No, David is very wroth with Amnon, but does not care to "vex his spirit, because he is his firstborn." By all Eastern usage, as well as by Hebrew law, Absalom is the *goel*, the avenger, of his sister. It is no crime, but a duty, to wipe out her shame with blood. But as David will not "vex the spirit" of Amnon,—and there is a world of weak unfatherliness in that fatherly phrase—so neither will he suffer it to be vexed. Hence Absalom is left to brood over his wrong in silence for a couple of years, till, by a treacherous ruse, he makes way for his revenge, and Amnon is stabbed as he sits at his brother's table and drinks his brother's wine.

We blame the deed, and, above all, the manner of the deed: but can we very severely blame the man? Not if we remember what the wrong was which he avenged, and how the world has always allowed a certain license to the avengers of such wrongs. Not if we remember that the justice, which the King ought to have been forward to execute, had been denied him, and how imperative were the duties imposed on the *Goel* both by Eastern custom and Hebrew law. Amnon was his half-brother indeed—a thought which might well have given him pause: but have we yet to learn that brothers born in the harem are born enemies, rivals from first to last? And it was not Absalom's fault that harem manners and jealousies had been introduced into Israel.

I am not arguing that Absalom was free from blame in this his first great crime, which was yet in some sort a duty. I am only pleading that we must not throw on him the blame which really belongs to his time, customs, conditions, laws, and to the evil effects of his training and of his father's laxness. And it may be that the recklessness by which his whole after-life was marked and marred was largely owing to the wrong he had suffered at David's hands

in not executing the law, as well as at Amnon's hands in shamefully breaking the law, and to the crime into which he was hurried by a sense of duty to his sister, as well as by the craving to avenge his own wounded honour. Such evil seeds are apt to bear evil fruit.

I think it *was* largely owing to this wrong, but not wholly. For there is one feature in the man, and a very influential and ruling feature, at which we have not yet glanced, but on which, if we would be just, we must lay grave emphasis. If "beauty is a gift," "beauty is" also "a snare." To few has the gift been so largely accorded as to Absalom; to few has it proved a snare so deadly. In him the personal comeliness and vigour of Jesse's line seem to have culminated. "In all Israel there was none like him for beauty; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him." So said the ancient chronicler (2 Sam. xiv. 25), and even to this day we can hear the ring of genuine admiration in his words: hear it, and perhaps smile at it. For, with us, there is no very general admiration of beauty—at least in men. "Beauty men" used to be a term of reproach in Thackeray's days. And I suppose there are still many young men who would be disgusted or annoyed, rather than pleased, if they were called "beautiful exceedingly," or even by a reputation for mere good looks; while there are many more who would affect annoyance. But the Bible indulges in no affectation or squeamishness of that sort. It frankly delights in beauty, even in a man, and recognizes its power, if also its danger. Again and again, for example, both in the Old Testament and the New, it lingers on the almost superhuman beauty of Moses, with his "face of God." Nor, say what we will, are *we* so insensible to the power and value of this gift as we pretend to be. Every now and then, as we pass through a great city, we meet men—old men, sometimes, as well as young—whose faces are so radiant with the

winning or commanding beauty which occasionally crowns fine character, or a happy temperament, or perfect health, that they seem to leave a benediction on the day. One is the happier for having seen them. And though, as a rule, the Jewish type of face does not commend itself to us, yet now and then, as in Mendelssohn or Rachel, it flashes into a splendour of the most rare and impressive kind. I have myself met two such men in the London streets within the last few years, one young and one old, both entire strangers and never seen since; and though it is more than forty years since I saw Mendelssohn, and sat looking at him and listening to him for three hours, I have not forgotten him yet and am never likely to forget him.

Of Absalom we are simply told that his beauty was unparalleled, without blemish, beyond compare; but it seems likely that it was of that rare type in the Hebrew race which stirs even them to an unwonted admiration. He may have inherited from his father the "ruddy countenance," *i.e.* the dazzling fair complexion so seldom seen in a Jew, which goes with blue eyes and golden locks; for it was the splendour of his hair which most of all excited wonder, insomuch that the annual "polling" of his hair is recorded as if it were a national event, and every year the hairs of his head were all weighed, if not numbered (2 Sam. xiv. 26). It may have been because of his rare and splendid beauty that, while still a child, he was called Absalom, or "the father of peace." Though he proved to be a "father of strife" rather than of peace, it may not unnaturally have been thought that a child so exceptionally lovely would kindle smiles and win a kindly welcome wherever he went.

It adds the last touch to our conception of his beauty, if we note that it sprang mainly from the most superb physical health, as his magnificent fell of hair indicates. For, then, we can only think of him as radiant with life

and energy, and accomplished in all the exercises both of peace and of war.

Now if we think of this young prince, with his hereditary tendencies, his defective training, never taught to rule or deny himself, coming out into a lax world,—tall, graceful, strong, his blue eyes swimming in light, his fair locks falling thickly on his broad shoulders, we shall understand that his very beauty may have been a fatal gift. Met with smiles, welcome, and an easy compliance with his caprices on every hand, hardly any one saying “No” to him, he never saying “No, I must not,” to himself,—what wonder if he became wilful, bold, insolent? what wonder if, his will once thwarted or his honour touched, he should instantly kindle into a blaze, or, if he hid his fire, should nurse and feed it till it found vent, and swept him beyond all bounds of law and duty? Is it not plain that position, training, temperament, habits, gifts, even the gift of beauty, all worked together to render him self-willed, capricious, restless, imperious, and, if crossed, violent and revengeful?

Even in the brief space he occupies in the Sacred Record, we have many proofs that there *was* something reckless and desperate in the man, that he was apt to throw the reins on the neck of his lusts and let them carry him where they would. We have seen how much may be fairly pleaded in his excuse for Amnon’s “taking off.” But if, remembering his provocation and the duty of revenge imposed on the Goel, we hesitate to pronounce that murder an unpardonable crime, we cannot but admit it to have been a desperate offence against the throne, with a touch of “treason, stratagems, and spoils” about it. For Amnon was heir to the throne, and Absalom *stood next in the succession!* Whatever colour of just and lawful private revenge the deed might take in his own mind, therefore, and whatever excuses he might plead for it in the forum of conscience, “the silent session of the soul,” it could not but wear a

political complexion in the minds of the King and his statesmen, create a fear that he was aiming at the throne, and would stick at nothing which came between him and his aim. That David and his "men" had some such suspicion of him, that they held him to be at least capable of an excessive and criminal violence in order to serve his ends, is proved by the fact that when an exaggerated report of Amnon's assassination reached them, when they were told "Absalom hath slain *all* the king's sons, there is not one of them left," David and his servants found nothing incredible in the horrible rumour, but rent their clothes, cast themselves on the earth, and wept for the goodly young men untimely cut off (2 Sam. xiii. 30, 31). If the tale was untrue, it was not unlikely.

A touch of the same recklessness and desperation comes out in the manner in which he jogged the drowsy memory of Joab (2 Sam. xiv. 29-32). It was by the intervention of Joab that Absalom was called back to Jerusalem from his three years' banishment in Syria. It was on Joab's intercession that he relied for an entire reconciliation with the King who, for two years after his return, stedfastly refused to see his face. Joab may have been doing his best for him, or he may not. In any case he did not move fast enough for the imperious young prince. He sends for Joab, therefore; but Joab, having no good tidings to give him, will not come. He sends a second time, and still Joab will not come. Whereupon he sends servants into Joab's farm to fire his standing barley, and so compels the old captain to wait on him, and to listen to his complaint that he would rather die than continue to live such a life as his.

But, of course, it was in his long planned and artfully prepared rebellion against his father and king that all that was violent, self-willed, unrestrained in the man—his insufferable and fate-provoking *ἔβρις*—found full vent. I need not enter into the details of this miserable and fatal

adventure—every one is familiar with them—and shew step by step how they illustrate the worst qualities of the man. It will be enough to note one point which is not obvious, and has been overlooked.

The sudden collapse of David's royal power the moment that Absalom's trumpets sounded the signal of revolt, has always been a little mysterious. We are surprised to hear the veteran King say to his servants, before a single stroke has been struck (2 Sam. xv. 14.): "Arise and let us flee; or we shall not else escape from Absalom: make speed to depart, lest he smite us suddenly, and drive calamity over us." But may we not, in part at least, account for "the fearfulness and trembling" which took hold on David till he had crossed the River and reached the Wilderness, by his knowledge of Absalom's character—his vehemence, his reckless audacity and unchecked violence, if opposed? Is there not a boding and suggestive significance in the words he uses: lest Absalom "*smite us suddenly, and drive calamity over us*"?

With Absalom's tragic end the bolt of retribution flew right home. Riding on the stately royal mule—*David's* mule—he fled from the victorious army of Joab, who seems to have had quite enough of so headstrong a prince, only to be caught, as he would not have been but for the mule, in the thick boughs of "the great terebinth" tree—caught by "his head," says Scripture, caught, says Josephus, by the flowing locks which had been his crown and pride—and there was hacked to death by pike and sword. And there we must leave him, an emblem of the fate which sooner or later overtakes all who put their trust in themselves, in health, in beauty, in strength of will, in any of the natural gifts they have received from a God whom they have forgotten and disobeyed.

And yet the pity of it! For had Absalom been reared as hardily and piously as David was in the home and on the

hills of Bethlehem ; had he been snubbed, laughed at, kept down, as David was, by a band of tall stalwart brothers ; had he, still like David, been tried by stroke on stroke of adversity and undeserved reproach through all the opening years of manhood, there seems little reason to doubt that he might have been no worse a man morally than his father was ; or at least no room to doubt that, by such a severe and pious training in duty and obedience, he might have been saved from the crimes by which his life was stained, and from the shame by which his memory is oppressed. In him, too, the spiritual man might have conquered the natural man at last, and stilled and controlled the fever of his blood.

As it is, we can but use his name to " point a moral," for we can hardly add, " and to adorn a tale." And the moral is, of course, the immense danger of suffering the animal man in us to overcome the spiritual man. The bias of *our* blood and temperament may not jump with his. Our training may have been better than his. Our faults, our ruling passions, our gifts may not resemble his ; and certainly most of us are not tempted to an insolent self-indulgence and selfwill by a splendour of personal beauty and charm which makes it hard for any one to resist us. And yet no one who knows himself will doubt that the brute is strong in him, however refined his habits and conditions may be ; that he too has inherited cravings, passions, lusts, which must be subdued if he is to be saved from sins as fatal, if not as flagrant, as those of Absalom. Most of us, indeed, need no prophet, no ancient chronicle, to warn us of our danger. Even in this Christian day, and among the members of our Christian congregations, we have seen it written large in the fall and shame of men and women who had never learned to restrain and deny themselves, or, having learned, had forgotten the lesson, and so have slipped from indulgence to indulgence, sin to sin, vice to

vice, till their passions have become first their masters, then their tyrants, then their punishment, and then their ruin.

And the flesh is not to be subdued and starved in any of us save as we feed and cherish the spirit. We can only overcome evil as we follow after that which is good. But if we seek to subdue the flesh by nourishing and developing the spirit, whether in ourselves or in our children, He who makes large allowance for us all, will largely and effectually help us all. However low he may have fallen, no man need despair of himself so long as he can turn in faith and prayer to Him who never breaks the bruised reed, nor suffers any spark of reviving life to be quenched. Nor, whatever fears may darken our hopes of any whom we love, and in whom we see only too many signs of self-will and self-indulgence, need we yield to our fears so long as we have on our side the Spirit of all purity and goodness; for it is not his will that in any one of his little ones evil should be overcome of good; it is his good pleasure that good should overcome evil in them, as in us all.

S. Cox.

---

### SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES.

#### 1 PETER II. 5.

It is the doctrine of the school of Tübingen that a reconciliatory tendency in any book of the New Testament proves that book to belong to a post-Apostolic age. The church is conceived to have been originally a scene of battle between its own members, in which the followers of the Judaic Peter were arrayed against the disciples of the Gentile Paul. The earliest Christian documents bear, it is said, the stamp of the struggle, and the literature of the first age is distinctly polemical in aim. It is when the first