

A READING IN 4QSam^a AND THE MURDER OF ABNER

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According to the masoretic tradition of 2 Sam 3:30, Joab and Abishai “killed Abner” (הרגו לאבנר). Commentators have noted the surprising inclusion of Abishai at this point, since in the preceding verses Joab alone has been involved in setting up and carrying out the assassination. Some scholars view the mention of Abishai as an interpolation,¹ which presumably draws upon the joint quest for revenge against Abner on the part of Joab and Abishai in 2 Sam 2:24 (cf. 3:34, 39), and explains the application of David’s curse to the house of Joab’s father (3:29). Although these references may suggest some form of involvement by Abishai in the planning of revenge, it is unexpected that Abishai should have been involved in the killing itself. Moreover, although ל following הרגו can be explained as a mark of the accusative (GKC §177n), and functions thus elsewhere with הרג (Job 5:2), it “occurs... rarely in the early and middle periods of the language, and with greater frequency in exilic and post-exilic writings.”² The ל with הרג in 3:30 would, according to a number of scholars, be more readily explicable if this were a late gloss.³

The Septuagint reads διαπαρετηροῦντο (διαπαρετηροῦντο in manuscripts BAbgpz^a), “they lay in wait for.” This is seen by most commentators as reflecting ארבו in place of MT’s הרגו.⁴ Such a reading would resolve the apparent problem of incompatibility with the account of the murder itself, and would at least be consistent with the in-

¹J. Wellhausen, *Der Text der Bücher Samuelis* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1872) 159; H. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904) 281.

²S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (2nd edition; Oxford: Clarendon, 1913) 185.

³Cf. Driver, *Notes*, 251.

⁴E.g. A. Klostermann, *Die Bücher Samuelis und der Könige* (Kurzegefasster Kommentar zu den heiligen Schriften des Alten und Neuen Testaments; Nördlingen: C. H. Beck’schen, 1887) 141.

v involvement of Abishai to the extent suggested by 2 Sam 2:24 (and probably 3:29, 34, 39). The reading also readily explains the presence of ל before its object, since such a construction is frequent with אַרְבּוֹ. However, as Driver points out, “this would scarcely be a just description of the manner in which Joab actually slew Abner; nor does the preceding narrative imply that Joab and Abishai had done previously anything that could be so described.”⁵ It is, on the other hand, possible that אַרְבּוֹ (or diaphoretically) is secondary, representing an attempt to make 3:30 consistent with 3:27.⁶

P. K. McCarter reports the 4QSam^a reading as לַפְּנֵי and therefore suggests צַפְּנֵי לַ (cf. Prov 1:11, 18), a reading which he believes could explain the Septuagint rendering and which, like אַרְבּוֹ, would remove the apparent contradiction of 3:27.⁷ However, McCarter’s solution, though attractive, is based upon a reading of 4QSam^a that is not borne out by the evidence. First, a close examination of what remains of the word that McCarter reads as לַפְּנֵי shows that the first letter outside the brackets is very unlikely to be a פ, as McCarter’s צַפְּנֵי requires, but is rather most naturally the remains of an א. This raises the possibility that 4QSam^a may have read הַתְּאֲנִי, the 3m.p. *hithpa’el* perfect of the rare verb אָנָה (III).⁸ The basic meaning of this verb is “be opportune, meet, encounter opportunely” (BDB), with the *hithpa’el* having the extended meaning of “seek an opportunity against” in the only certain occurrence of this stem (2 Kgs 5:7). This latter meaning fits this context well, and is consistent with the shared intention of revenge noted in 2 Sam 2:24. The suggestion has the added advantage of explaining the ל before the object, since this also occurs in 2 Kgs 5:7.

Secondly, a careful analysis of the available space between the extant fragments also supports this suggestion. If a vertical line is drawn down the left side of the main right-hand fragment and down the right side of the left-hand fragment relating to 2 Sam 3:26-30a (see Figure 1), then the amount of text occurring in the section between these two vertical lines would be approximately the same for each of the seven lines of text. The reconstruction of 4QSam^a for these seven lines is shown in Table 1 below, and the positions of the two vertical dividers are clearly shown. Measures of the amount of text in each of these sections are shown in Table 2 below. The traditional measure is the character count, whereby the number of letters between the two ver-

⁵Driver, *Notes*, 251.

⁶Cf. A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC 11; Dallas: Word, 1989) 54.

⁷*II Samuel* (AB 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 110.

⁸The verb is listed as אָנָה II or אָנָה III in the lexicons. Note the existence of derived nouns with preformative ת at Jud 14:4 and Jer 2:24.



Figure 1 (Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority)

tical lines is counted. Such a measure, however, can be significantly affected by whether there is a high proportion either of wide characters or of narrow characters. This problem has led to the development of a new measure, the “reconstructed width,” obtained by assigning to each letter that occurs between the two vertical lines the average width (in millimeters) of that letter found in extant fragments of the scroll.⁹ Thus, for instance, the reconstructed width of the word **זב** is 4.6mm, the sum of the average width of extant occurrences of a **ז** (1.20mm), a **ב** (2.09mm) and in inter-word space (1.32mm).¹⁰ This measure is greatly to be preferred to the character count since it takes full account of the variations in size between the different letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The differences between the reconstructed widths of the seven lines should, therefore, primarily arise from the inevitable variations in the size of the scribe’s writing and of the spaces between words.

⁹See E. D. Herbert, *A New Method for Reconstructing Biblical Scrolls, and its Application to the Reconstruction of 4QSam^a* (Cambridge University Ph.D. Dissertation, 1995) forthcoming E. J. Brill).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 57.

Line	Verse	Reconstruction of 2 Sam 3:26-30a
1	26	[וַיֵּצֵא יוֹאָב מֵעַם דָּוִד וַיִּשְׁלַח מִן־לְאֻכִּים אַחֲרָיו אַבְנֵי בָּנָר וַיִּזְּקוּ אֹתוֹ]
2	26/27	[מְבוֹר הַסֵּה וְדָוִד] לֹא יָדָע וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבָנֵי חֶבֶר וְנָה וַיִּטְּהֵן יוֹאָב]
3	27	[אֶל תּוֹךְ הַשְּׁעָר לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ בְּשֵׁלִי וַיִּכְהוּ שָׁם עַד הַחֲמִשָּׁה וַיִּמּוֹת בְּדָם]
4	27/28	[עָשָׂא אַחִיהוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע דָּוִד מֵאַחֲרָיו כִּן וַיָּבֹאוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ נָקִי אַנְי וּמִמֶּנִּי לִכְתִּי]
5	28/29	[מֵעַם יְהוָה עַד עוֹלָם וְדָם אֲבָנָר בֶּן נֵר יְהוֹל עָלָיו רַאשׁ יוֹאָב וְעַל כָּל]
6	29	[בֵּית יוֹאָב וְלֹא יָכֹרֶת מִבֵּיתוֹ] יוֹאָב זָבַח וּמִצְרַע וּמַחְזִיק בְּפִלֶךָ וְנוֹפֵל]
7	29/30	[בַּחֶרֶב וְהָסֵר לָחֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲבִי־שֵׁי הַתְּאֵנָה לְאַבְנָר עַל־אֲשֶׁר הִמְלִית]

Table 1: Reconstruction of 4QSam^a

Line Number	Character Count	Reconstructed Width (mm)
1	15	29.0
2	16	30.3
3	16	30.3
4	19	31.6
5	18	31.4
6	16	28.1
7	16	30.3

Table 2: Width of Middle Section of Lines 1-7

In the case at issue, the reconstructed widths of the relevant sections of lines 1-6 range between 28.1mm and 31.6mm, with an average of 30.1mm.¹¹ Reconstructing the verb-form as **התאנו** and omitting **אחיו** results in a reconstructed width of 30.3mm for the middle section of line 7, clearly viable in terms of space since it is so close to the average for comparable sections. The question arises, however, as to whether any of the alternatives are also viable. **אחיו צפנו** (as reconstructed by McCarter), **צפנו** with **אחיו** omitted, and **אחיו** together with only those letters in the verb-form that are actually extant (**אנו**) yield reconstructed widths for the middle section of line 7 of 35.7mm,

¹¹It should be noted that the reconstructed width of line 6 is less than for comparable sections, with the shortfall occurring almost entirely within the left half of the section, most probably because extra space has been taken up by the two occurrences of **ב** in final position (the **ב** near the beginning of line 7 also takes up significantly more space than a medial **ב**).

27.0mm and 34.2mm respectively. Moreover, since 4QSam^a actually uses the longer form אַחִיָּהוּ for אַחִי, in verse 27, our calculations should take this theoretical possibility into account for verse 30, in which case we would be talking of measurements of 38.2mm and 36.7mm for the first and third options.

These measurements clearly deviate significantly from the average of lines 1-6, but in order to assess whether such deviations are large enough to make the reconstructions improbable, it is necessary to ascertain the degree of variability in reconstructed widths of comparable sections that can arise from the inevitable variations in the size of the scribe's writing. This degree of variation has been calculated for 4QSam^a on the basis of extant fragments from this scroll.¹² These calculations suggest that for sections around 30mm wide reconstructed widths are very unlikely (less than 1% chance) to vary from the average of comparable lines (lines 1-7 in this case) by more than 10%. This means that the reconstructed width for the middle section of line 7 should fall within the range 26.7-33.7mm (and is most likely to be nearer the middle of the range).¹³

It is thus highly improbable that MT's אַחִי was present in 4QSam^a, since both McCarter's reconstruction and that which retains אַחִי, whilst reducing the verb-form to a minimum, yield reconstructed widths that are outside the above range. Although McCarter's צַפְנֹה, with אַחִי omitted, would result in a reconstructed width of 27.0mm, just within the viable range, this reconstruction is still fairly improbable since such a degree of deviation from the average reconstructed width occurs in only around 4% of such cases in the extant parts of the scroll. The relative implausibility of the alternatives in terms of space is, on the other hand, matched by the plausibility of the reconstruction proposed in this article, namely the longer verb-form (הִתְאַנֶּה), but without אַחִי. Character counts as a measure of width would not have been sensitive enough to allow such conclusions to be drawn.

The proposal in this short study is not only that 4QSam^a read הִתְאַנֶּה, but also that this represents the superior reading. This reading eliminates the problem that many commentators have had with the text, namely that elsewhere in the passage (3:27) it is Joab alone who kills Abner. On the other hand, the reconstructed text is quite con-

¹²See Herbert, *New Method*, 66.

¹³Note that the average for this purpose is calculated from the reconstructed widths of comparable sections *including* that of the section being compared to the average (the relevant section of line 7 in this case). Thus the viable range is slightly wider than 10% either side of the 30.1mm average relating to lines 1-6.

sistent with the involvement of Abishai with Joab in *seeking opportunity* to kill him (cf. 2:24). Indeed, the responsibility of Joab (and Abishai) rather than king David for the murder of Abner is a key concern of the writer in this narrative, which is one of the most apologetically-motivated in the Old Testament.¹⁴ The suggestion also benefits from its ability to account for the presence of ל before the object, as in 2 Kgs 5:7.

If הַתְּאֲנוּ is indeed the original, or at least the superior reading, then MT's הַרְגוּ is secondary. That this common word could have been misread from הַתְּאֲנוּ is quite possible, since the interchange of נ/ג and ת/ר and the loss of the commonly vulnerable quiescent א are all well-attested scribal errors. It is also interesting to note that הַתְּאֲנוּ matches the LXX in approximate meaning and general syntactic significance. This raises the possibility that הַתְּאֲנוּ was present also in the *Vorlage* of the LXX translator, rather than either of the Hebrew verbs אָרַב or צָפַן that have previously featured in retroversions of the Greek. It probably has to be said of צָפַן as much as of אָרַב that "lie in wait for" is too specific for the context.

Finally, the proposed reading has a bearing on the status of the verse in question. Some scholars view verse 30 as an interpolation which merely repeats verse 27 (of which, indeed, it may be a variant form),¹⁵ except that it has in addition the problematic reference to Abishai. If, however, the verse is saying that Joab and Abishai had been waiting for an opportunity to avenge Abner's killing of their brother "in the battle at Gibeon" (cf. 2:23), then it may, with its subject-verb-object arrangement, function as a truly retrospective comment on the series of events described in chaps. 2-3. The interposition of verses 28-29 between verses 27 and 30 creates no problem for the good sense and coherence of the narrative,¹⁶ to which the curse of verse 29 would seem to be integral as the covenantal reflex to the pact established between David and Abner, and that, in narrative terms, may provide David with his strongest defence against the charge of complicity in the murder of Abner.¹⁷

¹⁴Cf. R. P. Gordon, "Covenant and Apology in 2 Samuel 3," *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 13 (1990) 24-34.

¹⁵Cf. P. R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 47.

¹⁶Pace McCarter, *II Samuel*, 117.

¹⁷Cf. Gordon, "Covenant and Apology," 31-32.