A Genealogy of Resilience: The Women in David's Genetic Family Tree

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Women have often been overlooked in history, but genealogy is a citizen-science that acknowledges male and female equality. A family tree is not complete without both. In the Bible, David's genealogy listed the names of women but was rather quiet when it came to sharing their narratives. Thinking like a genealogist, asking empathetic questions, and using the exercises of well-thought-out speculation can reveal bigger stories—stories of tragedy and resilience that lie below the surface. The women in David's genetic circle (sisters, daughter, nieces, granddaughters) carried the DNA of the Davidic line which would bring forth the Messiah. Here are their stories.

David's Sisters: Zeruiah and Abigail

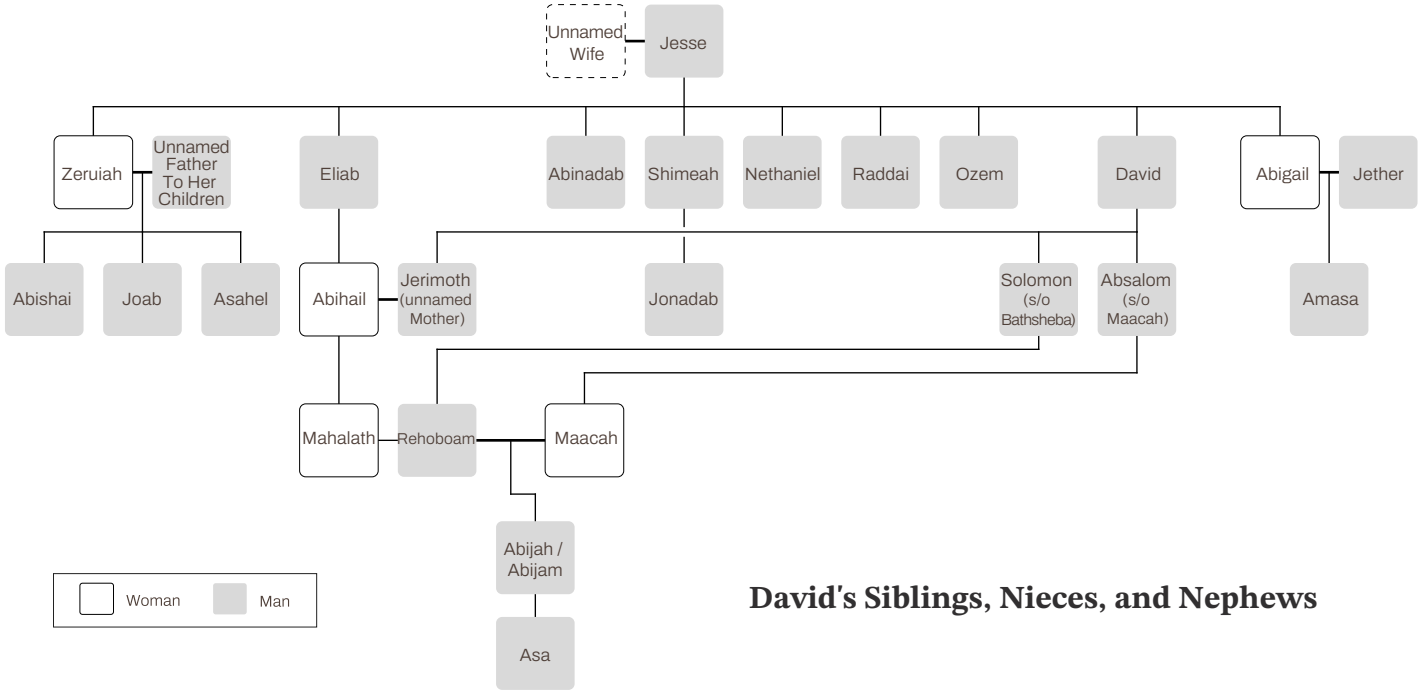
Of all the influential women in the Bible, Zeruiah has been, perhaps, the most overlooked. In spite of being mentioned twenty-six times, Zeruiah's name was almost exclusively attached to her three ambitious sons. They were frequently described as the "sons of Zeruiah," and never as the sons of their father. Nowhere in the biblical account is the name of Zeruiah's husband mentioned.[1]

Zeruiah's sons—Abishai, Joab, and Asahel—were David's nephews, and they had a tremendous, and often devastating, impact on David's life. Abishai was the chief of David's "Mighty Men" (1 Chr 11:20–21; 2 Sam 23:18). He was close to his uncle long before David was awarded the throne of Judah, fighting alongside David during the reign of Saul (1 Sam 26:5–12). Joab, Zeruiah's middle son, eventually became David's tenacious and formidable military leader. The youngest son, Asahel the swift of foot, was killed in battle by Abner, Saul's cousin and military commander (2 Sam 2:23).

Asahel's early death was a tragedy that undoubtedly devastated Zeruiah. No parent should bury their child. Did David console his sister? Did they grieve together? Was the reason Zeruiah's two remaining sons plotted revenge against Abner a response to their mother's grief? Abishai and Joab succeeded in their plot to kill Abner, and David's response to their vigilante deed was to host a public funeral so as to distance himself from what they'd done. He tore his clothes in grief, wept, and sang a song of lament for Abner (2 Sam 3:31–39). Imagine Zeruiah's feelings when her brother held a solemn funeral and publicly displayed his grief for the man who killed her child. Did David hold such a funeral when Asahel died? Did he tear his clothes and sing a song of lament for his nephew? The Bible does not say.

More than once, David lamented that his sister's sons were causing him grief.[2] Joab not only killed Abner, but he also ordered the death of David's son Absalom, as well as the death of his cousin Amasa. David concluded that Zeruiah's sons, with their capacity for death and destruction, were an adversary (Hebrew, *satan*) to him.[3] David recognized that the sons of Zeruiah (in particular, Joab) had too much political influence and a compulsion for violence which was damaging the kingdom.[4] After Joab killed Abner, David cursed Joab, declaring that the blood of Abner should fall on "the head of Joab and on all his father's house" (2 Sam 3:29 NRSVue). This was an interesting curse considering the Bible never divulged the name of Joab's father. Of course, cursing Zeruiah's house would have meant cursing David's own house and so he cursed the unnamed father of his three nephews.[5]

In full recognition of Joab's power, David suggested to his son and heir, Solomon, that Joab should be eliminated: "do not let his gray head go down to Sheol in peace" (1 Kgs 2:6 NRSVue). Solomon took



David's Siblings, Nieces, and Nephews

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the advice and sent Benaiah to kill his cousin. Fearing for his life, Joab sought asylum in the temple but, with Solomon's permission, Benaiah showed no mercy and killed him at the altar (1 Kgs 2:28–34).

An empathetic genealogist will often imagine the circumstances of an ancestor's life. If Zeruiah was still alive at the time, what would have been her actions when Joab sought refuge in the temple? Would she have gone to Solomon or Benaiah or her sister-in-law Bathsheba to beg for mercy? Did she pray for Joab's deliverance? Zeruiah had already lost her youngest son Asahel, and the text never reveals what happened to Abishai. There is no indication that Zeruiah's sons had any children or a lineage worth presenting. It seems that Zeruiah's legacy ended with the death of her three sons.

Abigail, David's other named sister, had one son, Amasa. The Chronicler reports that the child's father was Jether the Ishmaelite (1 Chr 2:17) whereas the book of Samuel (2 Sam 17:25) reported that Ithra the Israelite "went into" Abigail (KJV; most English translations say Ithra "married" Abigail) and fathered Amasa. This unique phrasing may indicate that this was a sexual encounter, not necessarily a marriage.[6]

David had an affinity for his sister's son, calling Amasa "my bone and my flesh" (2 Sam 19:13 NRSVue), but the relationship had its ups and downs. When David's son Absalom rebelled against him and tried to usurp the throne, Amasa, Absalom's cousin, stepped in to lead the rebel army (2 Sam 17:25). When Absalom was killed and the insurgence was squashed by Joab, David forgave Amasa and welcomed him back into the family. In a surprising move of overt forgiveness David sacked Zeruiah's son Joab—whose growing power had made David nervous—and placed Abigail's son Amasa as commander of his army in Joab's place (2 Sam 19:13).

David's flip-flopping between his sister's sons did not help the growing family tension. Joab, son of Zeruiah, did not take his demotion well and, being both jealous and suspicious of Amasa, he murdered Amasa with a kiss—which is noteworthy—and a sword (2 Sam 20:8–12). Joab left Amasa's body in the road until a soldier removed him, placed him in the adjacent field, and covered his body.

Abigail lost her only son, and it appears his body was never returned to her. The grief was undoubtedly overwhelming and likely fractured the relationship with her sister, Zeruiah, mother of her son's murderer. How would this tragedy impacted the relationships between Abigail, David, and Zeruiah? There's no indication that David punished Joab for murdering Abigail's son. The Bible lists no family for Amasa beyond his parents. If that is the case, Abigail's family tree ended with the death of her son.

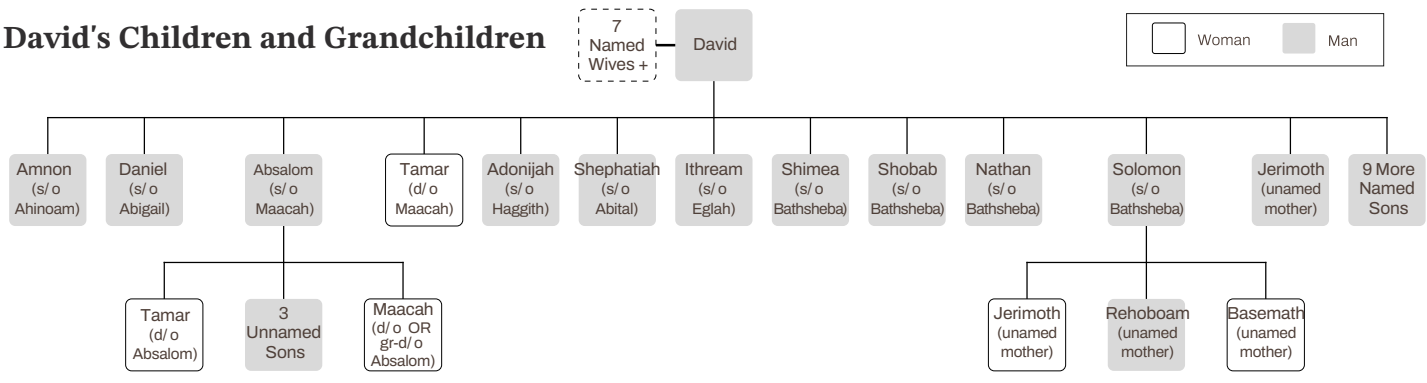
Murder was a common occurrence in David's family. Abigail lost her only son Amasa by the hand of Zeruiah's son, Joab. David's heir Amnon was killed by his younger son Absalom. Absalom died by the orders of Zeruiah's son, Joab. Joab was killed by the orders of David's son, Solomon. Zeruiah and Abigail are part of a family given to an appalling degree of violence.

David's Daughter: Tamar

Tamar was the daughter of David and his Geshurite (Aramean) wife, Maacah, daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur (2 Sam 3:3). This made Tamar (and Absalom) half-Israelite and half-Geshurite.

The story of Tamar's rape by her half-brother Amnon (son of David and Ahinoam) is a reminder that women have been victims of sexual violence across history. Amnon, with the encouragement of his cousin Jonadab, son of David's third brother, Shimeah (1 Chr 2:13, 2 Sam 13:3), orchestrated a targeted attack against his half-sister and, regardless of her pleading, forced himself upon her. According to the text, Amnon raped Tamar, then he hated her, rejected her, and sent her away (2 Sam 13:1–19).

In grief, Tamar put ashes on her head and tore her robe. It was a form of public protest, denouncing Amnon's actions. Then she took refuge in her brother Absalom's house. He consoled Tamar and told her to forget the rape (2 Sam 13:20), but he never forgot the offence and devised a long-term plan for vengeance.



From what we know, David did not stand up for his daughter after her rape. Nor did he console her, unless the narrative fails to record the event. David tore his clothes on many other occasions of grief or indignation,[7] but there was no record of him rending his garments when he heard of Tamar's rape, nor is there any record of Amnon receiving punishment for his crime. Amnon was David's heir, his firstborn. Did David bury this shameful attack to protect his heir apparent? Did he hope that this problem would resolve itself and quietly go away? Did the event remind him of his own guilt regarding the sexual demand he placed on Bathsheba, which is recorded only two chapters earlier? Had the rapist been anybody else, David might perhaps have been more willing to demand justice for his daughter. The attacker, however, was his eldest son and the crown prince, and so (it appears) he turned a blind eye.[8]

The text says nothing about Tamar's story after she was violated, other than that she went to live in Absalom's house (2 Sam 13:20). Of all the named women in David's genetic circle, Tamar was the only one who was never clearly identified as a mother or a wife. Did the rape exclude her from marriage? When Amnon rejected her, she feared she would be excluded and sent away without marital prospects. In her words, this rejection was worse than sexually assaulting her (2 Sam 13:16). Without a male protector, Tamar would be without a future. When Absalom murdered his half-brother Amnon and fled to the home of his (and Tamar's) maternal grandfather Talmai, king of Geshur (2 Sam 13:28–37), it is reasonable to imagine that Tamar joined him as part of his household. Perhaps her grandfather Talmai was more sympathetic to her suffering than her father David was.

According to the biblical account, Absalom stayed in Geshur for three years (2 Sam 13:38). Their cousin Joab, the son of David's sister Zeruiah, attempted to reconcile the relationship between father and son, using the intercession of a wise woman (2 Sam 14:1–20). Even after Absalom returned to Jerusalem, David ignored him for another two years before granting him an audience (2 Sam 14:28). Assuming their mother, Maacah, was still alive, one wonders how this might have put a strain on the relationship between David and his Aramean wife. It is not hard to imagine that she would have been an advocate for her son Absalom, and her abused daughter, Tamar.

David appeared to have developed the habit of avoiding family problems. Not speaking to Absalom for five years did nothing to mend their fragile relationship and, as a result, Absalom's lack of allegiance to his father and eventual rebellion were not surprising. Tamar would have been caught in the relationship struggles between her father, David, and her brother, Absalom. Had she felt obliged to choose a side, one can imagine who she would have picked. David was her father and king, but he does not seem to have acted to seek justice for her, alleviate her grief, or support her healing. By his actions, Absalom showed more concern and compassion towards Tamar than David. It is reasonable to suspect that she may have supported Absalom when he rebelled against their father.

David's Niece and Grandniece: Abihail and Mahalath

With seven brothers and two sisters, David undoubtedly had many nieces and nephews, but only one niece is named. Abihail was the daughter of David's oldest brother, Eliab of Bethlehem (2 Chr 11:18). She married her cousin Jerimoth, David's son through one of his unnamed wives. The only child of Abihail and Jerimoth that the reader is made aware of was their daughter Mahalath. She would become the wife of Rehoboam, king of Judah and grandson of David (2 Chr 11:18). This would make Mahalath David's granddaughter (through his son Jerimoth), his great niece (through his niece Abihail), and his granddaughter-in-law (as wife to David's grandson Rehoboam, son of Solomon). Her royal lineage was impeccable.

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Mahalath was the first wife of Rehoboam, but she was not the cherished wife. Rehoboam chose an heir from his wife, Maacah, the (grand) daughter of Absalom, and through this union the royal line of David was continued. Mahalath's rejection as primary wife must have been upsetting for her and her mother, Abihail. Their connection to David was deep and their royal lineage was of the highest quality. Mahalath was overlooked because Rehoboam favoured a daughter of Absalom, the charismatic people's prince who nearly succeeded in his coup against David. Absalom and Abihail were cousins, and both of their daughters were wives to king Rehoboam, son of their cousin Solomon. Rehoboam preferred Absalom's daughter over Abihail's daughter, because in this family power was everything.

David's Granddaughters: Taphath, Basemath, Mahalath, Tamar and Maacah

The text gives us five named granddaughters of David: Taphath and Basemath (daughters of Solomon), Mahalath (daughter of Jerimoth, mentioned above), Tamar and Maacah (daughters of Absalom).

Taphath and Basemath are mentioned only in relation to their husbands, who were two assigned deputies over land in Northern Israel (1 Kgs 4:11, 15). When their brother, Rehoboam, lost part of the kingdom to Jeroboam, their lives as royal princesses may have been in peril. Beyond this supposition, their story is unknown. Absalom's daughter, Tamar, is only mentioned once in the book of Samuel: "There were born to Absalom three sons and one daughter whose name was Tamar" (2 Sam 14:27 NRSVue).[9] Maacah is not mentioned.

In the Chronicler's account, Maacah is listed as the daughter of Absalom and the wife of Rehoboam, "whom he loved the most" (2 Chr 11:20–21). A study of the Hebrew word for children/grandchildren[10] suggests that a daughter or son can mean a child or a grandchild, so Maacah may have been a granddaughter of Absalom and great granddaughter of David.[11] Later in the Chronicler's account, Maacah was named as the daughter of Uriel (2 Chr 13:2). This could suggest that Maacah was the daughter of Uriel and Absalom's daughter Tamar, making her a granddaughter (not daughter) of Absalom. The Bible drops these hints but offers no clarity. In genealogy speak, this is a "brick wall." Until other textual evidence shows up, there can be no certainty.

Biblical genealogy indicates that naming children after loved ones was not a common custom, so it is worth noting that these two "daughters" of Absalom (Tamar and Maacah) were named after Absalom's mother Maacah, daughter of Talmai King of Geshur, and Tamar, Absalom's sister. The latter women must have been well respected and loved to have garnered namesakes. Outside of being named after her aunt, little is known about Absalom's daughter Tamar. Maacah, on the other hand, became the mother of Rehoboam's heir Abijah/Abijam. Scripture identified Maacah as one who turned away from YHWH (2 Chr 15:16; 1 Kgs 15:13). She was removed from her role as Queen (grand) Mother to King Asa (Abijah's son) because she created an idolatrous image.[12]

Mothers of the King

Even though women were necessary to deliver the lineage, ancient genealogies remained patrilineal. Only four women are named (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary) in the genealogy of Jesus as recorded by Matthew (Matt 1:1–17). Also mentioned, though not by name, is the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba) who became the mother of Solomon. No women, not even Mary, are mentioned in Luke's genealogy. Every generation had a mother, so it is unfortunate that Luke and Matthew failed to mention[13] the other identified women in Jesus's direct line, such as Maacah (mother of Absalom), Maacah (mother of Abijah), or other mothers of Judean kings, like Azubah, Zibiah, and Hephzibah.[14]

In the royal family of David, women were political pawns. Their power, if any, was based on their ability to be mothers. Zeruiah was the mother of Abishai, Joab, and Asahel; Abigail was the mother of Amasa; Abihail was the mother of Mahalath; Maacah was the mother of Abijah/Abijam (see 2 Chron 13:1 Kgs 15:1–2), king of Judah, and grandmother to his heir, Asa. The kings of Judah had multiple wives but only one mother. The mothers were the true queens, for the five women in Matthew's genealogical account are presented as mothers rather than wives. "Out of" women came the cherished Messianic lineage.[15]

Women of the Davidic Covenant

David's family life was pretty much a disaster, but it was through such a tangled mess that the Messiah, of the Davidic covenant, was born. A study of anyone's genealogies will show that every human comes from complicated stories of complicated people. Jesus, in this regard, was no different.

Jesus fulfilled the Davidic covenant by coming out of a line of women who bore great grief, whose sons died by the hands of their own family. Mary stood at the foot of the cross, knowing the same thing. Her son Jesus died by the hands of his own people. How fitting that he had to die like a son of David to be victorious. The women in David's family tree had to live through, and overcome, significant trauma. There is enough in the biblical text to give us an idea of what it was like to be a mother, a daughter, a niece, or a sister in David's complicated and tumultuous family. These resilient women suffered much grief, but they should be remembered because their DNA runs deep in the covenant which gave birth to the Messiah.

Their descendant Jesus also faced violent trauma. By falling into the depths of Sheol and rising out of it, he overcame trauma and death to save every branch of the human family tree: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28).

Notes

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VII, 1.3. Josephus named Suri as Zeruiah's husband and the father of her sons.
2. See 2 Sam 3:39; 2 Sam 16:10; 2 Sam 19:22.
3. Ryan E. Stokes, "Satan, Yhwh's Executioner," *JBL* 133/2 (2014): 253–54.
4. Although Joab did much to fortify the kingdom and never sought to overtake the throne, David recognized the threat of Joab's dominating influence on the kingdom.
5. Was this curse a lashing out by David or a prophetic announcement? 2 Sam 16:10 hints that David expected curses to only have a consequential result if they represented God's will.
6. Paul S. Evans, "All in the Family of David: The Chronicler's Change from the Ammonite (2 Sam 17:25) to the Davidic Zeruiah (1 Chr 2:16)," in *Community: Biblical and Theological Reflections in Honor of August H. Konkel* (Pickwick, 2022) 78–79.
7. Sarah E. Fisher, "Qara: The Ancient Custom of Tearing your Clothes" (Feb 2, 2025) https://hebrewwordlessons.com.
8. The rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah resulted in a targeted attack against the city of Shechem. Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, exacted revenge (like Absalom), but her father Jacob (like David) offered her no consolation (Gen 34).
9. Absalom's three sons were never named in the Chronicler's account. According to 2 Samuel, Absalom built a tower to be remembered because, he said, he had "no son to keep my name in remembrance" (2 Sam 18:18 NRSVue).
10. Sarah E. Fisher, "B'ney banim: Children of Children, Biblical Grandparents & Grandkids" (Sept 10, 2023), https://hebrewwordlessons.com.
11. 2 Chr 13:2 lists Maacah with an alternative spelling: Michaiah.
12. Julie Kelso, "The Transgression of Maacah in 2 Chronicles 15–16: A Simple Case of Idolatry or the Threatening Poesis of Maternal Speech?," *Bible and Critical Theory* 3/3 (2007) 1–2.
13. Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies, with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45.
14. Azubah was the consort of king Asa and mother to king Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:42, 2 Chr 20:31); Zibiah was the consort of king Ahaziah and mother to king Jehoash (2 Kgs 12:1, 2 Chr 24:1); Hephzibah was the consort of king Hezekiah and mother to king Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1).
15. Matthew used the Greek phrase, ἐκ τῆς, meaning "out of," preceding the name. For example, *Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah out of Tamar* (Matt 1:3).

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