

Joab, a Ruthless, but Fiercely Loyal Commander

[Ed Jarrett](#) | Contributing Writer

2021 15 Sep



Photo credit: ©Getty Images/cineuno

Joab is one of the more interesting characters in the Old Testament. He plays a prominent role in the government of King David as the commander of the army. And his name is mentioned repeatedly in the [Scripture](#). Yet he is also mysterious and hard to understand. So just who is Joab?

A Part of David's Extended Family

David had at least six or seven brothers ([1 Sam. 16:10](#), 1 Ch. 2:13-15) and two sisters (1 Ch. 2:16). One of David's sisters was Zeruah, and she had three sons: Abishai, Joab, and Asahel (1 Ch. 2:16). Based on the order given in 1 Chronicles, Joab would appear to be the younger brother of Abishai.

It is likely that Joab was younger than his uncle David. When David died at 80 years old Joab was still very much alive and active in the political intrigues of the kingdom. But he was likely not much younger. During the early days of David's kingdom, Joab was old enough to command the respect of the army. While it is just speculation, I can see David interacting with Joab and his brothers as they are growing up together in Bethlehem.

An Early Supporter of David

In [1 Samuel 22:1](#) we are told that soon after David had fled from Saul, his brothers and father's household joined him in exile, along with about 400 other men. That could well have been for their own protection as much as out of loyalty to David. Saul likely would have been eager to kill not just David, but his family as well. So, while not mentioned by

name, Joab likely joined up with David along with the rest of David's family at this time, early in his exile.

Joab is first mentioned by name in [2 Samuel 2:13](#). David was king of Judah and Abner was the commander of the army of the northern tribes. Joab, along with David's men, met up with Abner and his men. Representatives of their respective armies fought and then the battle grew. Abner and his men fled. But during the pursuit, Joab's brother Asahel caught up to Abner, and Abner killed him.

Joab is next mentioned in [1 Chronicles 11:6](#). David had been crowned as king of Judah, and then, seven years later, by the rest of the tribes. David then chose Jerusalem to be his capital of the united kingdom. The problem was that Jerusalem was occupied by the Jebusites. Joab led the successful attack on Jerusalem and, as a result, was made commander-in-chief of the army.

Jealous of His Position and Ruthless in Maintaining It

After seven years of a divided kingdom, Abner met with David and covenanted with him to establish David as king over a united monarchy. After Abner left David, Joab heard about it and called Abner back. When Joab met up with Abner, he killed him. The given reason was revenge for his brother's death. But it is not hard to imagine that Joab might have felt threatened by Abner's presence – that David might replace him as commander of the Army.

David's response to Joab's murder of Abner was curious. He mourned for Abner and emphasized his innocence in the affair. And that is in keeping with David's character. But in [2 Samuel 3:39](#) he exclaimed that the sons of Zeruah were too strong for him, even though he was king of Israel. Why could David not simply have killed Joab, or removed him as commander? It would appear that Joab, at the head of the army, was in some ways a threat to David, and that the loyalty of the army was to Joab more than to David.

Many years later David's son Absalom revolted against his father. Absalom appointed his cousin Amasa, who was also Joab's cousin ([2 Sam. 17:25](#)), to command his army. After the rebellion was put down, David attempted to replace Joab as his army commander with Amasa ([2 Sam. 19:13](#)). But when Joab found out about it, he killed his cousin ([2 Sam. 9-10](#)), and maintained his hold over the army.



Photo credit: ©Getty Images/Massonstock

Fiercely Loyal to David

It has always struck me as a little strange that Joab was content to be in charge of the army. He was willing to kill even family members who might replace him. Yet there is never any indication that he had any interest in the throne. That belonged to David, and he was a staunch supporter until near the end of David's life. And even then, it was only to offer support to one of David's sons as heir to the throne. But it was not the son that David had chosen.

Once when Joab had the army out attacking a city, he called on David to come to claim the victory ([2 Sam. 12:26-28](#)). After Joab and the army defeated the rebel Absalom and his army, David mourned for his fallen son. And it was Joab who talked sense into him and got him to go out and welcome the troops ([2 Sam. 19:5-8](#)). And, when David wanted to take a census of Israel, Joab attempted to talk him out of it ([2 Sam. 24:1-17](#)). David ignored Joab's advice here and it was costly.

Joab was a ruthless man who would broker no threat to his own position. Yet until he sided with Adonijah against Solomon, David's chosen successor, Joab had consistently looked out for David's best interests. He knew David was king and he was unflinchingly loyal to him.

David's Hatchet Man

As you have seen, Joab was not squeamish about shedding blood, especially of those he saw as a threat. But he was also willing to do the dirty work for David. The most notable example was the part he played in David's affair with Bathsheba. When David sent Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, back to the battle front, he carried a message for Joab. Arrange for Uriah's death in an upcoming battle ([2 Sam. 11:14](#)). And Joab seemed to have no compulsion about doing it, even though Uriah was one of the elite soldiers of David's army ([2 Sam. 23:32](#)).

Joab was also not above ignoring David's command if he felt it was in David's best interest to do so. Nowhere is this more evident than in Absalom's rebellion. David gave explicit instructions to his army and their commanders not to harm Absalom ([2 Sam. 18:5](#)). Yet when Joab found Absalom hanging in a tree, he had no compulsion against killing him ([2 Sam. 18](#) 14-15). He knew that so long as Absalom lived, he would be a threat to David and his kingship.

Ultimately a Victim of His Own Ambition

David's relationship with Joab was a complex one. They were family and had worked together in leading Israel for the 40 years of David's reign as king. Joab was a skilled and highly successful army commander who was fiercely loyal to David. And David trusted him to act in the best interests of both David and the kingdom. Yet Joab was not above defying David if it meant maintaining his own position at the head of the army. At least twice, he killed men that David had thought to appoint over the army in place of Joab. And David felt powerless to do anything about Joab's insubordination.

But Joab finally made a deadly mistake. Solomon was David's heir apparent. But another of David's son's, Adonijah, was ambitious and sought to usurp the crown for himself. He gathered the support of some of the leading men of the realm, including Joab. And then he acted to declare himself king. When David learned of this rebellion, he had Solomon crowned king, putting an end to the short-lived insurrection. While David himself did not punish those who sided with Adonijah, he did leave instruction for Solomon to deal with them. In particular, he made clear to Solomon that Joab should not die in [peace](#). And ultimately Solomon had Joab put to death.

Why did Joab choose to side with Adonijah rather than David's designated heir? We are not told that. But, given Joab's ambition to rule the army, I think it likely that Adonijah had offered that position to him. So, he made a fateful choice that, in the end, cost him his life.

God Uses Even the Broken

For the 40 years of David's reign, as well as the years leading up to it, Joab was a loyal lieutenant. I don't believe Joab gets nearly enough credit for David's conquest of the surrounding nations and the establishment of the empire. Without Joab, things might have turned out quite differently.

The relationship between David and Joab was a complex one. David depended on Joab, even while he felt powerless to completely control him. They grew up together, went into exile together, and together carved out an empire. The golden era of Israel was the reign of David. But standing alongside him was his nephew Joab.

David is described as a man after God's own heart ([1 Sam. 13:14](#)). And God used him mightily. Joab's character seems to have fallen short of David's. Yet God also used him in establishing the kingdom. God can use all of us, broken as we are, to carry out his purpose in creation and in his kingdom.

Related articles

[Why Was Abishag so Important to King David and His Sons?](#)

[Beautiful Lessons in Biblical Friendship from David and Jonathan](#)

[Why You Really Should Read 1 Samuel](#)