

David was a great conqueror, but he was not a one-man show. There are several large sections of text in the Bible that name key military figures in David's army. These men helped him secure his throne. A group called David's Mighty Men (also known as "The Thirty") appears in two sections of scripture, I Chronicles 11:10-47 and II Samuel 23:8-39. The tales of their achievements would make great theatrical movies and make for an engaging study!

Who Were David's Mighty Men?

David's Mighty Men were an elite force who helped David establish his Kingdom also known as "The Thirty." Their bravery is unparalleled and their accomplishments would make any warrior druel. The Bible gives us the names of these heroes, describes some of their incredible feats, and shows us how they were organized.

According to II Samuel 23, there were 37 men in all, although this part of the text only mentions 35 by name. ((50+ in all the records combined)) However, I Chronicles 11 includes most of the names from II Samuel but adds several more. This leads us to believe that like any standing military unit, the membership is fluid. As some men die, they are replaced by others. The names we see in the two texts are the names of those who were part of The Thirty at one point or another.

Were these really squads that operated together as a unit in combat? It is actually difficult to know for sure from the text.¹ However, the fact that the text divides these groups of men into three and labels one man as the leader, lends itself to that possibility, even if it was just for a limited time.

What is clear from the text is that out of The Thirty, the Bible praises two squads (possibly three) for surpassing the skills of all the others.

The First Three

The first squad of three, the most elite, was comprised of Josheb-Basshebeth the Tachmonite, Eleazar the son of Dodo, and Shammah the son of Agee. Josheb-Basshebeth was the squad leader.

Eleazar, at one point, held off the Philistines even though the Israelites had retreated, until "his hand stuck to the sword."

Shammah defended a field of barley (or lentils), possibly with the help of the other two, and prevailed against the Philistines.

After relaying the individual exploits of these three men (II Samuel 23:8-12), the text then mentions a second group of three but does not provide names (II Samuel 23:13-17). From carefully reading the text, I surmised that this is not a second group at all, but the same three mentioned above.

In this second story, we learn the stealth capability of this elite squad. During one of David's many encounters with the Philistines, shortly after the capture of Jerusalem, the men engage in a daring exploit to retrieve water for David. David and his army were operating out of the cave of Adullam and the Philistines had encamped in the Valley of Rephaim and their garrison was located in Bethlehem. These men managed to sneak through the Philistine lines, retrieve the water from a well outside the gate of Bethlehem, and bring it back to David. It was a daring and suicidal feat!

The Second Three

The second group of three was led by Abishai, brother of Joab (Joab was the commander of David's army) and David's nephew. Benaiah, who would become Captain of David's guard, was also part of this second group, but the third member remains nameless. It is clear from the text, that these men were more skilled or honored than The Thirty as a whole, but did not quite reach the level of the first squad.

Abishai would end up having a long and impressive history under David's command. His exploits include killing 300 men, commanding at different levels within David's army (divisions, brigades, and at one point one-third of the army), and saving King David from a giant toward the end of David's military career.

The Biblical text credits Benaiah with killing two ariels³ from Moab and killing a lion in a pit. The text in II Samuel 23:21, describes his prowess in disarming a giant Egyptian and then killing him with his own weapon. Benaiah's crowing achievements would be commanding David's guard, and later commanding the entire army under Solomon.

Although the names of 50-plus men are mentioned in total between the two records in II Samuel and I Chronicles, we know little of their individual accomplishments, except for three. Asahel was brother to Joab and Abishai and was David's nephew. The Bible hails him for his speed. II Samuel 2:8 says he was "as swift of foot as a wild gazelle." Unfortunately, Abner, the commander of Israel's army (when the nation was still divided) kills Asahel.

Naharai was not only one of The Thirty but also an armorbearer for Joab. Armorbearers were responsible for a lot more than just carrying their leader's armor. They were superb warriors who acted as bodyguards for their officers and learned to skillfully fight in concert with the ones they were sworn to protect. We know Joab was a skilled fighter, and as commander of David's army, he would have required his armorbearer to be an elite warrior.

The life these men led while following David in the wilderness would have been austere, desperate, and dangerous. A strong bond, not to mention unbreakable loyalty, must have developed between David and these warriors. It is also during these times that these men would have honed their skills and developed their prowess.

David's Mighty Men Operated Under the Will of God

Why does God take the time to list each of these individuals by name and tell some of their stories of bravery and courage?

Because they operated under the will of God. The Thirty were instrumental in achieving God's will and helped David secure his throne.

Now these are the chiefs of David's mighty men, who gave him strong support in his kingdom, together with all Israel, to make him king, according to the word of the LORD concerning Israel.

I Chronicles 11:10 (ESV)

The introduction to The Thirty begins with these words in I Chronicles 11:10. The Bible makes it clear that David's accomplishments were only possible because of the loyal support of these warriors. Furthermore, it states that it was accomplished, "according to the word of the LORD concerning Israel."

David was a brilliant military leader, successfully subduing his enemies, expanding his kingdom, and establishing Israel as a formidable force in the Levant. But any leader, whether military or not, cannot achieve greatness without a strong, loyal support network. David's was comprised of elite, superb warriors. They accomplished the impossible and I would dare to say few military units in history have achieved their skill.

Unfortunately, despite the length of text dedicated to these men, students of the Bible rarely mention them and they often seem forgotten. But biblically, they are not and they were key players in the establishment of Israel as a nation. The intentional mention in the Bible is an encouraging reminder of God's appreciation of the warrior's sacrifice and the importance of giving proper credit to not only those who lead a campaign but also to those who support it.