

This article was downloaded by: [Betzig, Laura]

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Publisher Routledge

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## Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713790508>

### Sex and Politics: In Insects, Crustaceans, Birds, Mammals, the Ancient Near East and the Bible

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Online publication date: 17 December 2009

**To cite this Article** Betzig, Laura(2009) 'Sex and Politics: In Insects, Crustaceans, Birds, Mammals, the Ancient Near East and the Bible', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 23: 2, 208 — 232

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/09018320903303561

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09018320903303561>

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## Sex and Politics

### In Insects, Crustaceans, Birds, Mammals, the Ancient Near East and the Bible

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**ABSTRACT:** Eusocial species form societies in which subordinates, which belong to an obligately sterile caste, help raise the young that dominants produce. As in any eusocial species, reproduction was strongly “skewed” in the Ancient Near East: kings assembled harems of thousands of women, and fathered hundreds of children; but their families were provisioned and protected, in part, by eunuchs. As early as 4th-millennium Uruk, “beardless” subjects waited on bearded monarchs; large numbers of eunuchs were commanding imperial armies and administering imperial palaces by Ashurbanipal’s time. Assyrian emperors, on the other hand, left records of hundreds of harem governess and weavers, servants and singers; and Artaxerxes II, the Persian king, is supposed to have fathered 115 bastards, along with 3 legitimate sons. So it went in Ancient Israel and Judah. Hebrew kings from David to Zedekiah grew dependent on eunuch messengers, eunuch stewards, eunuch army commanders and eunuch palace guards—who served as workers and soldiers for their hundreds of concubines and wives, and their housefuls of daughters and sons.

On their way out of Egypt, Moses warned his people about kings. After they’d crossed over the Jordan and come into the Promised Land, he knew they’d be wanting a king of their own. But any good leader should be approved by their god, and he had to behave. He should avoid multiplying horses for himself, and he should avoid multiplying silver and gold. But most of all, “he shall not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away” (Deuteronomy 17,14-17).

Under the judges, people were warned again. After Gideon won battles on the perimeter of Canaan, they asked him to “rule over us, you and your son and your grandson.” But Gideon declined. “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the lord will rule over you,” he said. That didn’t keep him from collecting 1700 shekels of gold spoil—melted down to look

like a loincloth and set up in his hometown (“and all Israel played the harlot after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family”); or from collecting enough wives to give him 70 sons—besides getting at least one bastard on a maidservant, who called himself Abimelech (“my father is king”). Abimelech went on to kill all but one of his brothers, and succeeded his father. But his youngest brother, Jotham, survived; and he cried aloud from the hilltops about the bad ways of kings. Good men—like honorable olives, sweet figs, or cheerful vines—were always reluctant to run things. But bad ones—like thorny brambles—were always willing. “Come and take refuge in my shade,” the brambles would say; and if not, they’d consume everything by fire (Judges 8,22-27; 9,7-15).

A few generations after Moses, the people were warned one more time. They’d asked Samuel, the last judge of Israel, for a king. But Samuel was a son of a bigamist himself, and the half-brother of boys who’d taken advantage of women “who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting;” so he was aware of the risks of raising an overlord up (1 Sam 2,22; 8,3). And his lord put these words in his mouth:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your menservants and maidservants, and the best of your cattle and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day (1 Sam 8,11-18).

But Samuel did as he was told, and anointed Saul.

As many as 3000 years after Samuel, Charles Darwin admitted in his *Origin of Species* that natural selection, his theory, had precedents in “passages in Genesis.” Like Ancient Greeks and Romans, and like plant and animal breeders for the last ten thousand years, the people of Israel had put evolution into practice. In Darwin’s own words, any advantage, however slight, in competing with nature’s “hostile forces”—advantages, for instance, in fighting predators, resisting parasites, finding food, or finding mates—should offer its bearers “the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind.” And the result should be a preponderance of traits predisposing their bearers to survive and reproduce. In other words, “be fruitful and multiply” should be written into the genetic code (Gen 1,28).

In his book on *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin made it explicit that *H sapiens*, like any other species, should have evolved to compete—for safe habitats, for food, and for mates. As Darwin’s contemporary circumnavigators were already aware, women all over the

world—from Australia, to the Americas, to Homeric Greece—were “the constant cause of war both between members of the same tribe and between distinct tribes.” More than once, a weak man had been deprived of a wife that a stronger man found “worth his notice.” And as a result, weak men often did without.<sup>1</sup>

As Moses, then Jotham, then Samuel had warned, most of Israel’s kings did turn out to be fruitful men. Like the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian kings who surrounded them, they put up enormous palaces, and filled them with enormous numbers of women and children. Some of those women were collected as captives in war, and others were collected as tribute by law; there were often hundreds or thousands of them, and they bore hundreds or thousands of children.

But for every king with a hundred women, 99 men went without. Some worked as slaves or conscripted laborers, or sacrificed their lives as soldiers; and some lived and worked in the imperial civil service, as members of sterile castes. Like subjects in eusocial insects, crustaceans, birds and mammals, like subjects across the Ancient Near East, subjects in Ancient Israel were often reproductively suppressed.

#### *Insects, Birds and Mammals*

In most species—from insects, to birds, to crustaceans, to mammals, to *H sapiens* across the Ancient Near East—societies build up on rich habitats. But wherever individuals get together, they compete; and the winners breed. Subordinates are reproductively suppressed, and dominants have high reproductive success.<sup>2</sup>

In every society, there are dominance hierarchies. Some are relatively steep; others are relatively flat. But competition is a determinant of rank in all groups. And subordinates that pose greater threats are more often attacked. Bigger, higher status, older, and breeding or potentially breeding targets are most at risk.<sup>3</sup>

Among other things, dominants inhibit the fertility of other group members by hormonally suppressing ovulation, hormonally inducing abortion, killing or eating eggs, and killing or eating young. And subordinates who are inhibited from reproducing on their own often help raise dominants’ young. They nurse them or feed them, groom them or protect them. Many of those

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1. Darwin 1859: 31, 63; 1871:871. See Betzig 1986,1993, and in preparation on sex in ancient civilizations.

2. See Dewsbury 1982, Clutton-Brock 1988, and Ellis 1995 for reviews of the evidence in animals; see Betzig 1997 and Smith 2005 for reviews of the evidence in humans.

3. For a history of dominance studies, see Wilson 1971: chapter 13. On pecking orders: see Pardi 1948 and Cant, Liop and Field 2006 on paper wasps, Michener and Brothers 1974 on hallicid bees, Forkman and Haskell 2004 on chickens, Reeve and Sherman 1991 on naked-mole rats, Berdoy *et al.* 1995 on wild rats and Kutsukake and Clutton-Brock 2006 on meerkats.

behaviors are common across taxa—from more egalitarian groups, to societies in which despotism is nearly absolute.<sup>4</sup>

Dominants, on the other hand, have consistently high reproductive success, often as a result of their subordinates' help. Dominants may parent a small fraction, if almost invariably the largest fraction, of the next generation, in societies where reproductive “skew” is low. But they commonly produce 80% to 100% of the young in societies where reproductive “skew” is high. And across generations, status is often inherited. Dynasties build up on good territories, which tend to be passed on to daughters and sons.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly half a century ago, an Indian entomologist, Suzanne Batra, coined the term *eusocial*, to describe insect societies that 1) share the care of group young, and 2) restrict direct reproduction to a few individuals per group. Over the last 15 years, that definition has been expanded to include animals in a variety of taxa—from social insects including ants, bees, wasps, aphids and thrips; to a sponge-dwelling shrimp; to the East African naked mole-rat. Most societies have some reproductive helpers, or “alloparents;” and all societies show some degree of reproductive variance, or “skew.” But some societies are more skewed than others. At one end of the continuum, where skew is low, most subordinates in a group are able to produce their own young, though dominants usually outreproduce them; at the other end of the continuum, where skew is high, subordinates become members of an obligate sterile caste. There is some evidence of that for the Ancient Near East. And there is more evidence in the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Ancient Near East*

Like social insects, crustaceans, birds, or other mammals, monarchs across the Ancient Near East established dominance by winning contests with their strongest competitors. Then they defended and administered their societies, and raised their families, with help from subordinates who were reproductively suppressed, sometimes as sterile castes; and they had high reproductive success. That happened across Western Asia, from Assyria to Babylon to Persia. And it happened from the beginning of recorded time.

*Politics.* In order to set their own dynasties apart, most Ancient Near Eastern kings targeted the rich. When, in the 24th century BC, Sargon of Akkad set up a Mesopotamian empire, he “dismantled the cities as far as the shore of the sea.” Town walls were torn down in 34 campaigns, then local governors

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4. Stacey and Ligon 1990, Choe and Crespi 1997, Solomon and French 1997, Koenig and Dickinson 2004, Wolff and Sherman 2007 and Hagar and Jones 2009 collect evidence on “cooperative breeding” and reproductive suppression in animal societies; Duffy 1996 adds evidence on shrimp. See Hausfater and Hrdy 1984 on infanticide.

5. Models of reproductive “skew” originated with Emlen 1982 and Veherencamp 1983, and have been reviewed by Reeve and Hölldobler 2007 and Ratnieks and Wenseleers 2008. Hamilton 1964 is the classic paper on kin selection; Emlen 1997 reviews some of the data on dynasties.

6. Batra 1966 and Wilson 1971 first described “eusociality;” Sherman *et al.* 1995 and Lacey and Sherman 2005 expanded the definition.

were replaced by men from Sargon's hometown. "From the Lower Sea onwards, the natives of Akkad are holding the governorships;" and some were probably Sargon's sons. In the same way, when Ur-Nammu set up another dynasty in the 21st century, he "destroyed the cities, the evil, cleared them of the oppression of the 'lofty'," and set up royally appointed governors over churches and provinces. By the 7th century, Assyrian emperors like Esarhad-don and Ashurbanipal were saying they'd "abase the mighty, and raise up the lowly," which they accomplished partly by deporting members of the local nobility from provinces they'd conquered, and setting up their relatives or retainers as governors. And in 6th-century Persia, Darius the Great demoted nobles to *bandaka*, or "bondsmen," doing his best to "break up the cliques which are out for their own interests;" provinces were governed by 20 or more *satraps*, who were accountable to a smaller set of prefects. Some administrators were *br byt'* or sons of the royal house, others were the king's "personal friends;" and some were of foreign extraction, possibly castrated men.<sup>7</sup>

Strong emperors filled their bureaucracies with "outcasts" and "foreigners"—people who lacked important ancestors, or new men. Stronger emperors depended on "dry trees"—or eunuchs, or men who lacked sons (Isaiah 56,3. 8). They enlisted a sterile caste.

As early as the 32nd century BC, "beardless" attendants waited on "bearded" kings on the Warka Vase at Uruk. Not much later, mother earth made a body "who has no male organ, who has no female organ, to stand before the king, as was its fate," in a Sumerian *Creation Myth*. Toward the end of the 2nd millennium, Middle Assyrian Harem Edicts had LÚ.SAG.MES, or *sut resi*, "made fit for court service" by having their testicles crushed; and others were cursed in medical texts: "may your semen dry up like that of a eunuch who cannot beget."

By the Biblical period, there were eunuchs all over the Ancient Near East. Sometimes, the "beardless" worked in the Assyrian domestic service: they patrolled the imperial palace corridors or watched the front doors. Others worked in the foreign service: they were governors of, for instance, Arrapha or Calah. Some worked in the imperial bodyguard: emperors wondered

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7. Sargon of Akkad, *Royal Inscription* in *ANET*, pp. 267-68; known governors who were royal princes include the "king's son" Shu-mergi, Naram-Sin's son Nabilumash, and Naram-Sin's son Lipit-ili—see Sollberger and Kupper 1971:106 and Foster 1982:22. See the *Sargon Chronicle* (in *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, or *ABC*) for temple property; see Gibson and Biggs 1987 on administration of the Ur III state. "Abase the mighty" is from an Assyrian vassal treaty (*Neoassyrian Treaties*, no 6); Daniel 1:3 on relocating nobles; among others, Shamash-shum-ukin was made ruler of Babylonia under his brother Ashurbanipal; Postgate 1974 and Grayson 1995 on Assyrian administration. *Bandaka* is from the *Behistun Inscription*; Herodotus, *Histories*, iii.80-82 on cliques; Vittmann 1991-92 on *br byt'*; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, iv.4 for "personal friends;" Daniel 6:1-4 on satrapies and "presidents," see below on Daniel as a foreigner or castrate. Kuhrt 1995 and Sasson 1995 review the Ancient Near East.

whether any of the “eunuchs who bear arms, or bearded officials who bear arms” might raise rebellions against them. Others commanded the army. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Shamshi-Adad V issued an order that sent Mutarris-Ashur, the chief eunuch, “one clever and experienced in battle, a sensible man, with my troops and camp to the land Nairi;” and at the end of the 8th century, Sennacherib sent his chief eunuch (in Akkadian, *rab sa-resi*, in Hebrew, *Rab’saris*) along with a great number of troops, to fetch Hezekiah out of Judah (2 Kings 18,17).<sup>8</sup>

In Babylon, eunuch legends went back to Semiramis—as Shammuramat, the 9th-century queen, was later remembered in Persia and Rome. Ctesias, the Greek doctor who lived in Persia with Artaxerxes II toward the end of the 5th century BC, thought Semiramis may have been done in by a eunuch, “through the treacherous connivance of her son.” And Ammianus Marcellinus and Claudian, who both worked nearly a millennium later at late Roman courts, execrated Semiramis’ memory as “the first to surround herself with beings like her, in order to disguise her sex,” or as “that ancient queen who was the first person to castrate boys at a tender age.”

There were plenty of eunuchs in Babylon by Biblical times. The prophet Isaiah notoriously warned that Hezekiah’s sons would be taken out of Judah, and turned into “eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (2 Kings 20,18; Isa 39,7). A century later Nebuchadnezzar, or Nebuchadnezzar II, took Jerusalem, with the help his chief eunuch (*Rab’saris*), Sarsechim. Another eunuch, Nebushazban, escorted the prophet Jeremiah back home; and the eunuch, Ashpenaz, rounded up boys from the royal family and the nobility’s sons, Judah’s “youths without blemish, handsome and skilled in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning and competent to serve in the palace,” and brought them to Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon. Josephus—who lived in Judaea a century after Herod the Great “favored eunuchs” at his Jerusalem court—was willing to believe that Daniel and friends had all become castrated men (Jer 39,3-39; Dan 1,3-4).<sup>9</sup>

There were more eunuchs in Persia—written about, in this case, by Greeks living at around the same time. When Herodotus credited Darius the Great with taking tribute from 20 provinces, he held Babylon and Assyria accountable for 1000 talents of silver, and “500 eunuch boys.” Others were the spoils of Darius I’s wars: after the Ionians were beaten, “the best looking boys were chosen for castration and made into eunuchs.” Darius’ son, Xerxes

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8. See Collon 1998 on the Warka Vase; *Creation of Man* as translated in Kramer 1997, p. 104; Tiglath-pileser III, *Middle Assyrian Palace Decree* on patrolling; Starr 1990, #142 (“eunuchs who bear”); *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods*, 3 A0.103.1 ii.16b-21a for Mutarris-Ashur. See Grayson 1995 and Deller 1996 on Assyrian eunuchs, and Tadmor 1983, 2005 on *Rab’saris* in Kings; see Dalley 2002 for a dissenting view.

9. Ctesias, *Persika* from Diodorus, *History*, ii.20; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, xiv.6.17 and Claudian, *Against Eutropius*, i.339ff; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, x.x.1, xvi.8.1. See Hopkins 1963 on eunuchs in Rome.

I, bought eunuchs in the market—at Sardis for instance, where good looking, castrated boys were considered “trustworthy in every way.” And Xenophon, who fought as a mercenary for a son of Darius II, agreed: “no man was ever faithful who loved anyone else better than the one who needed his protection.” But they weren’t always so loyal. Alexander’s Greek biographers would remember centuries later that Bagoas (“a eunuch in physical fact, but a militant rogue in disposition”) had done in all the sons of Artaxerxes III, then raised up Darius III—who lost his empire to Alexander.

At Persepolis—where cupbearers in reliefs on the walls were all drawn without beards—Nehemiah, who worked as a cupbearer for Xerxes I, may have been a castrated man (Nehemiah 1,11). There are other eunuchs in Esther—where Ahasuerus, probably Xerxes I, is looked after by 7 eunuch chamberlains; another eunuch chamberlain, Hegai, is “in charge of the women;” another eunuch chamberlain, Shaashgaz, is “in charge of the concubines;” and another pair of eunuch chamberlains, Bigthana and Teresh, guard the doors. The castrated chamberlain, Hathach, is “appointed to attend” on Esther herself; and another castrated chamberlain, the “ass driver” Harbona, has Haman hung on the gallows (Esther 1,10-15; 2,3-21; 4,4-5; 6,2-14; 7,9).<sup>10</sup>

*Sex.* At the same time, Ancient Near Eastern emperors put hundreds or thousands of women in their own harems; and they probably fathered hundreds of children (Table 1, Figure 1). Some of those women were recruited as captives, in war; others were recruited as tribute, by law. In the Gilgamesh epic, from as early as 26th-century Uruk, the king left not a soldier to his father, and not a girl to her mother. Gilgamesh showed up at his subjects’ weddings, and initiated their brides by his right of the first night. “For Gilgamesh, the King of Broad-Marted Uruk, open is the veil of the people for choosing. He will have intercourse with the destined wife, he first, the husband afterward.” By the 24th century, the reformer Urukagina of Lagash was writing into his clay cones: “The houses of the *ensi* and the fields of the *ensi*, the houses of the palace harem and the fields of the palace harem, the houses of the palace nursery and the fields of the palace nursery crowded each other side by side.” A generation later, 5400 men “ate bread daily” in the palace of Sargon; and the women in Sumerian harems begged the gods to “split the good place like a cucumber” in Sumerian proverbs. From as far back as the 21st century, the names of 54 DUMU LUGAL (or “sons of the king”) and DUMU-SAL LUGAL (or “daughters of the king”) survive from Shulgi’s Ur III reign. “Because I am a proud man rejoicing in his loins,” as Shulgi put it in his inscription, *The King of the Road*. Another 3 centuries later, upriver at Mari, Hammurabi of Babylon’s friend, Zimrilim, sent a letter to his wife,

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10. Herodotus, *Histories*, iii.92, vi.32, viii.105; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, i.3.9, vii.5.58-65; Diodorus, *History*, xvii.5 for “rogue;” Arrian, *Anabasis*, ii.14.5 and Curtius Rufus, *History*, vi.4.10 for Bagoas. See Schmidt 1953 for cupbearer reliefs. See Yamauchi 1980 on Nehemiah, and Llewelyn-Jones in Tougher 2002 on eunuchs in Persia.

Shibtu, asking for 30 weavers—“or however many are choice and attractive, who from their toenails to the hair of their heads have no blemish;” other women filled Zimrilim’s 300-room palace.<sup>11</sup>

In Assyria, Esarhaddon made his son, Ashurbanipal, an emperor in the “royal harem,” which he grew up to rebuild “on a magnificent scale.” Some lists in Ashurbanipal’s 20,000 plus clay tablet library kept track of “Harem Governesses and Weavers” and “Female Singers;” others mention 36 governesses, 145 weavers, 52 maids, and another 194 miscellaneous women.<sup>12</sup>

There was a “House of the Palace Women” in Nebuchadnezzar II’s Babylon—with its own provisioners and overseers of the slave girls. And a generation later, on the eve of the Persian invasion, Belshazzar entertained a thousand men with gold and silver vessels from Jerusalem’s temple, brought out so that “his wives and his concubines might drink from them” (Daniel 5,1-3).<sup>13</sup>

There were more harems in Persepolis. When Darius III went to war with Alexander the Great, he took along 200 *propinquorum* (close kin) and 15,000 *cognati* (remoter kin), along with the queen mother, the queen, 365 female companions (one for each day of the year), his children, their governesses, and a “herd of eunuchs.” By then, Artaxerxes II had already fathered 115 illegitimate *sons*—besides 3 legitimate ones.<sup>14</sup>

Some girls were spoils of war. Toward the end of the 3rd millennium, when Sumer’s cities got sacked, the invaders took advantage of local girls. “Pried open were their strong kirimmu-garments,” says the *Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur*. At the end of the 8th century, when Sennacherib set siege to Jerusalem, he took off Hezekiah’s “daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians”—having already taken “his wife, his harem, his slave girls,” and musicians who gladdened his princely mind from Merodach-baladan in Babylon. Esarhaddon later raided “the women of his palace, his harem,” from the king of Egypt; then Ashurbanipal brought home “chariots, coaches, palanquins, and concubines” when he made war on his brother in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar II took away women from Judah’s king Jehoiachin: “the king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and the chief men of the land,” were taken to Babylon; then Nebuchadnezzar did the same to Zedekiah: “all your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans” (2 Kings 24,15; Jer 38,23). And when the Persians collected eunuchs after wars

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11. *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tablets 1-2; Urukagina, *Reforms*, as translated in Kramer 1963: appendix 24; Sargon, *Historical Document*, and Shulgi, *King of the Road* in *ANET* pp. 268, 585; see *Proverbs of Sumer* i.47, i.82, iii.36; Sollberger 1954-6 and Gelb 1979 for Shulgi’s 54 names; see Ziegler 2002 on harems at Mari: Zimrilim’s letter to Shibtu in *Archives Royales de Mari*, x.126, translated in Batto 1965, p. 26.

12. *Rassam Cylinder* in *ARAB and Imperial Administrative Records*, nos. 23-26 on Ashurbanipal’s harem.

13. Nebuchadnezzar II, *Wadi-Brisa Inscription* in *ANET*, pp. 307-8.

14. Curtius Quintus, *History*, iii.3.22-24, x.5 and Justin, *Epitome*, x.1.

with the Greeks, “the most beautiful girls were dragged from their homes and sent to Darius’ court.”<sup>15</sup>

Other girls were collected as tribute, by law. In Assyria Ashurnasirpal II put silver, gold, iron, linens and “200 teenage girls” on his 9th-century list of tribute from Hatti. And in 5th-century Susa, Ahasuerus, or Xerxes I, sent out an order that “beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king.” In that story, women are brought in as tribute, basted for 6 months with myrrh and another 6 months with spices, then herded into the palace. “In the evening she went, and in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the concubines.” Esther would never have gone in to Xerxes again, “unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name” (Esther 2:2-14). A tradition continued under Xerxes’ grandsons: Artaxerxes II, says Herodotus, collected more women and eunuchs than pack animals and Indian dogs. “They were far too numerous to count.”<sup>16</sup>

### *The Bible*

The Bible is consistent with its historical context. Kings of Israel and Judah aggressed against their strongest subjects: some lost their lives, others lost access to high offices. David drew up a census, but kept his tribes intact; Solomon drew up new districts, then set his sons and sons-in-law out to collect taxes. In their places, Hebrew kings grew dependent on eunuch messengers, eunuch stewards, eunuch army commanders and eunuch guards. And their own bronze and cedar palaces were filled with women and children.

*Politics.* On the day Samuel anointed Saul as Israel’s first king, he was acquiescing to “all the elders of Israel gathered together.” But Saul’s “rights and duties” were limited by law; and he lost his office after he stopped listening to his prophets (1 Samuel 8,4; 10,25; 13,13-14).

In the same way, “all the elders of Israel” came to David; they made a “covenant” with him, and “anointed” him king. Over the tribes of Israel, David set up those elders and their sons: only Judah, his own tribe, was set under Elihu, one of David’s brothers. But other offices were filled with the king’s family and friends. One of David’s nephews, Jonadab, became one of his advisors; and one of David’s uncles, Jonathan, being a man of understanding and a scribe, “attended the king’s sons.” Joab, who commanded Israel’s armies, and started a census (“but did not finish,” as “David’s heart smote him after he had numbered the people”), was a son of David’s sister—as were 3 other army officers, Abishai, Asahel and Amassa. Benaiah, one of

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15. *Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur*, 229-30: compare Gelb 1973 on Ur III prisoners of war; Sennacherib, *Annals* (in *ARAB*), Esarhaddon, *Senjirli Stele* (in *ARAB*)—Esarhaddon’s *Dog River Stele* (in *ARAB*) says he added 30 harem tiaras; Ashurbanipal, *Rassam Cylinder*, 6th Campaign (in *ARAB*); Herodotus, *History*, vi.32 (“most beautiful”); Herodotus *Histories*, vi.32 on Ionians and Persians.

16. Ashurnasirpal II, Raid through Bît-Adini, *Annals* (in *ARAB*), for “200;” compare Gen 12,10-16; Herodotus, *History*, vii.187. Betzig, in preparation, reviews sex and politics in the Ancient Near East.

many “near kinsmen” from Judah, was set over David’s bodyguard (2 Sam 5,3; 13,3; 17,25; 19,42; 21,21; 24,10; 23; 1 Kings 4,6; 1 Chronicles 2,16-17; 20,7; 27;7-32). Some of David’s competitors lost more than offices: others were put to death. Saul’s lame grandson Meribaal, or Mephibosheth, was spared; but 7 others were “hanged on the mountain before the Lord.” And “David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker” (2 Sam 3,1; 21,7-9).

After David and Bathsheba’s son, Solomon, succeeded, there were a few early murders: his ambitious half-brother Adonijah, Adonijah’s supporter Joab, and Saul’s relative—and David’s tormenter—Shimei, were struck down and killed. “So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon” (1 Kings 2:24-46). Then he continued his father’s reforms. Solomon took in 10 fat oxen, 20 pasture fed cattle, 100 sheep, harts, gazelles, roebucks, fowl, and 90 *kor* of coarse meal or fine flour every day; and he brought in 666 talents of gold every year—partly by reconfiguring Israel’s districts, and breaking up Israel’s tribes. A dozen new officers were appointed to administer those districts; they “provided food for the king and his household” for one month every year. At least 2 of his district officers married Solomon’s daughters; and number of his cabinet members grew. Some inherited their jobs from their fathers: they were sons of secretaries, sons of army commanders, sons of prophets and priests. But others were low men raised up. There was a new man (Ahishar, the “singer”) in charge of the palace, and a new man (Adoram, the son of a “servant,” Abba) in charge of forced labor. Eventually, large numbers of בן מלך, *bn hmlk* or *ben hammelek*, “king’s sons,” would administer Israel and Judah. So would large numbers of eunuchs (2 Sam 8,16; 1 Kings 4,2-19; 5,13-18; 9,22; 10,14; 1 Chron 28,1; 2 Chron 9,13; 11,23).<sup>17</sup>

The Hebrew word סריס, or *srys*, or *saris*, from a root meaning “to castrate,” shows up 42 times in the Old Testament: 4 times in Genesis, once in Samuel, 8 times in Kings, twice in Chronicles, 13 times in Esther, 3 times in Isaiah, 5 times in Jeremiah, and 7 more times in Daniel. *Rab’saris*, or “chief” *saris*, shows up twice more in Jeremiah, and once again in Kings. Those words were all variously rendered as officers, chamberlains, and eunuchs under King James.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes, Hebrew kings found jobs for their eunuch subjects. When Samuel warned the people about a king, he included a few words about castrated men: “He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his *sarisim* and to his servants” (1 Sam 8,15). A generation later, when David named his son Solomon the next king, he assembled the most powerful men in his united kingdom at Jerusalem. There were princes of Israel, princes of tribes, captains over thousands, captains over hundreds, stewards over all the property of the king and his sons, mighty men, seasoned

17. See Halpern 1981, 2001 on civil servants under Israel’s first kings; see Fox 2000 on king’s sons.

18. Compare laws against castration in Dtn 23,1 and Lev 21,18-24.

warriors—and his *sarisim* (1 Chron 28,1). In Israel, Ahab would use eunuchs to summon his prophets; Ahab's son, Jehoram, would use a eunuch to look after fields and produce; and Jezebel, who was Jehoram's mother, would be thrown out of a window by 2 or 3 eunuch guards (1 Kings 22,9; 2 Kings 8,6; 9,32; 2 Chron 18,8). In Judah, after Josiah had gathered together Jerusalem's inhabitants, and read the book of the covenant found in the house of the Lord out loud, he took away the horses and burned the chariots dedicated to the sun at the door of the house of the Lord, which was "by the chamber of Nathan-melech, the *saris*" (2 Kings 23,11). But Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, Josiah's sons, did evil in the sight of the Lord, and became servants of the kings of Egypt and Babylon; and Jehoiachin, who was Jehoiachim's son, was taken off to Babylon—along with "his mother, and his servants, and his princes, and his *sarisim*" (2 Kings 24,12-15; Jer 29,2). 10 years later, his uncle Zedekiah, who was Josiah's last son, would be taken off to Babylon—along with the chief priest, the second priest, the princes of Jerusalem, the princes of Judah, and a multitude that included his Ethiopian eunuch and the *saris* who commanded his army. Other women, children, soldiers and *sarisim* would remain in Jerusalem, even after Zedekiah was gone (2 Kings 25,19; Jer 29,2; 34,19; 38,7; 41,16; 52,25).

Other times, Hebrew subjects worked as eunuchs for foreign kings. Hezekiah's sons may or may not have become "eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" (2 Kings 20,18; Isa 39,7). And a hundred years later, after Nebuchadnezzar II's master eunuch, Ashpenaz, rounded up Judah's *yldym*, or *yeladim*, in this case, "youths without blemish, handsome and skilled in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning and competent to serve in the palace," he may or may not have turned them into eunuchs. At any rate, Daniel (or Belteshazzar), Hananiah (or Shadrach), Mishael (or Meshach), and Azariah (or Abednego) were made chief prefect and provincial governors at the Babylonian and Persian courts (Dan 1,3-21; 6,1-4).

*Sex.* Hebrew kings were more fertile. Saul had a concubine, Rizpah, and a wife, Ahinoam; and he fathered 7 named sons and 2 named daughters (1 Sam 14,49-50; 2 Sam 3,7; 21,8; 1 Chron 8,33; 9,39). But there were probably others. "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome" than Saul; besides, he was "a man of wealth." But most of all, he fought well. After he'd beaten the Philistines, "the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with timbrels, with songs of joy, and with instruments of music" (1 Sam 9,1-2; 18,6-12). Women rewarded a good king. As the lord later put it to David, through the prophet Nathan: "I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; and I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom." They amounted to the same thing (2 Sam 12,7-8; Table 2, Figure 2).

Even before he became king, David took a few wives. There were Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah—and Saul's daughter, Michal. Then after he became king, David added a few more. "And David took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron;

and more sons and daughters were born” (1 Sam 25,42-43; 2 Sam 3,2-5.13; 15,16). Only one of his Jerusalem wives is named: Solomon’s mother, Bathsheba, was stolen from David’s neighbor Uriah, after he “sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her.” But there was plenty of room in his palace for other women. Hiram of Tyre had sent cedars and carpenters to build it; and David had covered the walls with ivory. Then he’d filled it with “virgin companions” (his wife Abigail brought 5) and “maidens without number,” with concubines (at least 10) and the daughters of kings. He didn’t mind uncovering himself in front of those women, “as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!”—making his wife, Michal, jealous (Ps 45,9-14; 1 Sam 25,42; 2 Sam 6,20; 11,4; 15,16; Song of Solomon 6,8). Michael ended up childless; but David fathered at least 20 sons. The Bible names Amnon, Chileab (or Daniel), Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah, Ithream, Shammua (or Shimea), Shobab, Nathan, Solomon, Ibhaz, Elishua (or Elishama), Eliphelet (or Elpelet), Nogah, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliadah (or Beeliada), another Eliphelet, Jerimoth—and Tamar, his only known daughter.

But it was David’s son, Solomon, who violated all of Moses’ laws: he multiplied horses; he multiplied wealth; and he multiplied wives (1 Kings 10,14-11,3). With a little more help from Tyre’s Hiram, Solomon put up his own palace. It stood on a hewn stone foundation, supported by cedar beams and pillars of cast bronze; and it took 70,000 burden bearers, 80,000 stone hewers, 3,300 officers, and a forced levy of 30,000 subjects 13 years to finish (1 Kings 5-7). There was enough room for Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, Hittite and Egyptian women, 700 wives, or “princesses,” all “far more precious than jewels.” And there was room for another 300 concubines—“man’s delight” (1 Kings 11:1-3, Proverbs 31:10, Ecclesiastes 2:8). The Bible names Solomon’s daughters Taphath and Bas’emath, and his son Rehoboam (1 Kings 4:11-15; 1 Chronicles 4:10). But there must have been others. When Rehoboam (or “he who enlarges the people”), succeeded his father, he sided with the *yldym* or *yeladim*, the “young men who had grown up with him”—who advised him to extort as much as he could from his subjects. “My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins,” he told them (1 Kings 12:8-11). Rehoboam is credited with 18 wives and 60 concubines, 60 daughters and 28 sons; and Rehoboam’s son Abijah, credited with just 14 wives, fathered at least 16 daughters and 22 sons (2 Chron 11,21-23; 13,21). Later Ahab, who made Jezebel his queen, put up an ivory palace, and slept in an ivory bed, is supposed to have had “seventy sons in Samaria” alone (1 Kings 22,39; 2 Kings 10,1.7; Amos 6,4).<sup>19</sup>

Aspirants to a man’s power always aspired to his women. After Saul died on the battlefield, but before David became king, Saul’s uncle Abner took liberties with Rizpah, his concubine. That upset Ishbosheth, Saul’s son; but when Abner defended himself Ishbosheth backed down, “because he feared

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19. See Fox 1997 on the “young men” in 1 Kings 12; and compare the 318 לִידִים “born in his own house,” circumcised by Abraham in Gen 14,14.

him” (2 Sam 3,7-11). A generation later, when Absalom revolted against his father, and “went in to his father’s concubines,” David fought back: after a battle in the wood of Ephraim, Absalom ended up hung in an oak with 3 darts in his chest (2 Sam 16,20-22). Upstarts were nipped in the bud, by Solomon’s time. When his brother, Adonijah, asked for the hand of Abishag, David’s beautiful nurse, Solomon swore the request would “cost Adonijah his life!” (1 Kings 2,23-25; compare Genesis 35,22; 1 Chron 5,1-2 on Jacob and Reuben).

Kings lost women and children for one reason—*because* they’d lost faith. God made that perfectly clear to his beloved, David. He’d given David Saul’s kingdom and Saul’s women; but he could take them away if David disobeyed. “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of the sun,” the lord warned (2 Sam 12,7-11). That happened again and again.

Judah came to an end under a few bad kings. After the Assyrian king Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem, Hezekiah was advised that his sons would become “eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon;” then Esarhaddon, who was Sennacherib’s son, took Hezekiah’s son Manasseh off to Babylon, with a hook in his nose and a bit in his mouth—*because*, said the prophet Isaiah, he’d “raged” against their creator (2 Kings 20,18; 2 Chron 33,11; Isa 37,29; 39,7). Later the pharaoh Necho II, who put an arrow in Josiah at Megiddo, brought Josiah’s son, Jehoahaz, back to Egypt to die—*because*, in the words of Jeremiah’s scribe, he’d done “evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 23,29-35; 2 Chron 35,20-24; 36,1-4). Then when Nebuchadnezzar II first sent an army to Jerusalem, he captured Jehoiachin, and brought “the king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and the chief men of the land,” back to Babylon—*because*, as the prophet Ezekiel knew, they were “a nation of rebels.” Just 11 years later, when Nebuchadnezzar’s men came again, they slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and “dragged” his women away—*because*, the prophet Jeremiah cried, they’d done “evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 24,15; 25,7; Jer 38,23; 52,2-10; Lam 1,4; 5,11; Ezek 2,3).<sup>20</sup>

But kings of Israel were bad to a man. Saul lost his life, and his sons’ lives, and left behind a house that “became weaker and weaker”—*because*, as the prophet Samuel said, he’d “rejected the word of the Lord” (1 Sam 15,23; 31,6; 2 Sam 3,1; 28,18). And even David’s first son by Bathsheba got sick and died—*because*, in Nathan the prophet’s words, he’d “utterly scorned” his god (2 Sam 12,14). Jeroboam’s son, Nadab, was later done in by the usurper, Baasha, who “left to the house of Jeroboam not one that breathed” — *because*, the prophet Ahijah believed, they’d “provoked” their lord (1 Kings

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20. Sennacherib, *Annals*, 3<sup>rd</sup> campaign adds that Hezekiah lost “his daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians;” Nebuchadnezzar II, *Jerusalem Chronicle* (in *ABC*, 5) says he imposed “heavy tribute” on Judah. See Patai 1959 and Perdue 1997 on families in ancient Israel; see Betzig 2005, 2008 on sex among patriarchs and judges.

14,4-16; 15,28-30). Then another usurper, Zimri, put an end to Baasha's son, Elah, and "did not leave him a single male of his kinsmen or his friends"—*because*, Jehu the prophet knew, they'd "angered" their god (1 Kings 16,1-18). Zimri lasted just 7 days. He was replaced by the head of the army, Omri, and by Ahab, his son. But another usurper, Jehu, "whom the lord had anointed to destroy the house of Ahab," did them in: he killed all 70 of Ahab's sons, "like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebar, and like the house of Baasha the son of Abijah"—*because*, said the prophet Elijah, they'd led Israel into unfaithfulness, and "forsaken the commandments of the lord" (1 Kings 18,17-18; 20,5-7; 21,22-23; 2 Kings 9,4-10; 10,7-11; 2 Chron 21,13-15; 22,7).

*Eusociality: From Bees to the Bible*

*Eusocial* species live in societies with multigenerational groups, that both 1) share the care of group young, and 2) restrict direct reproduction to a few individuals per group. But by both of those criteria, eusociality can be seen on a continuum. At one end of the scale, in societies where reproductive "skew" is low, subordinates act as "alloparents," and delay their own direct reproduction, only until a new habitat opens up. At the other end of the scale, in societies where reproductive "skew" is high, subordinates devote their lives to raising the offspring dominants produce, as members of an obligately sterile caste.

Across the Ancient Near East, kings collected hundreds or thousands of women as war captives or tribute; and they administered their empires, and raised large numbers of children, with help from hundreds or thousands of eunuchs. As early as a 4th-millennium vase from Mesopotamian Uruk, "beardless" or "impotent" subjects waited on "bearded" and "potent" monarchs; and by the time 1st- and 2nd-millennium Assyrian emperors left records in stone, eunuchs were commanding their armies, looking after their properties, collecting women to fill royal harems, and guarding those women and their children. There were hundreds of maids, weavers, governesses and other women in Ashurbanipal's "magnificent" 7th-century Assyrian harem, which would have included the "chariots, coaches, palanquins, and concubines" he'd stolen from his brother in Babylon; and a century later, Nebuchadnezzar II took women from Judah's kings: "all your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans." As early as the 21st century BC, Shulgi of Ur III recorded the names of at least 54 daughters and sons; and in the 4th century, Artaxerxes II, the Persian king, fathered 115 bastards, along with 3 legitimate sons. As in any eusocial species, breeding was highly skewed; and the children of prolific monarchs were protected, provided for, and raised by a sterile caste.

So it went in the Bible. The Hebrew word *saris* (for eunuch), or *Rab'saris* (for chief eunuch) shows up 45 times in the Tanakh. Hebrew kings from David to Zedekiah grew dependent on eunuch messengers, eunuch stewards, eunuch army commanders and eunuch palace guards. Among other things, they would have guarded their "virgin companions," their concubines (as

many as 300), and their wives (or “princesses,” numbering up to 700). And they would have looked after their palaces full of *yldym*, or *yeladim*, or daughters and sons.

Figure 1. Number of women attributed to Ancient Near Eastern kings.

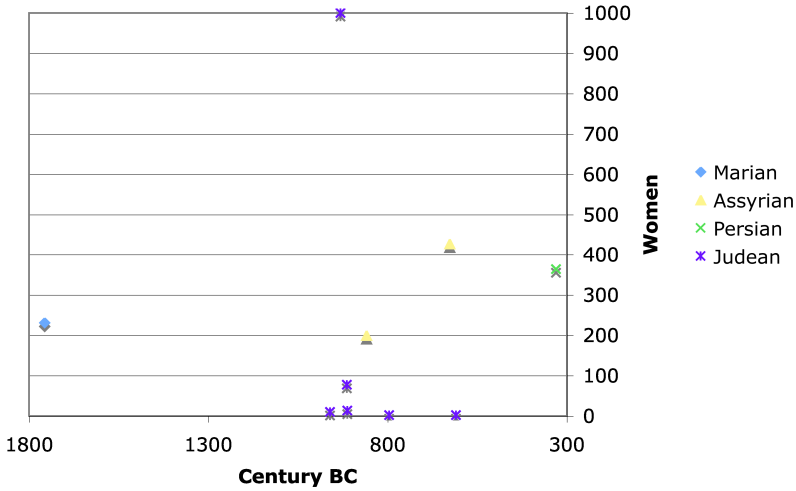


Figure 2. Number of children attributed to Ancient Near Eastern kings.

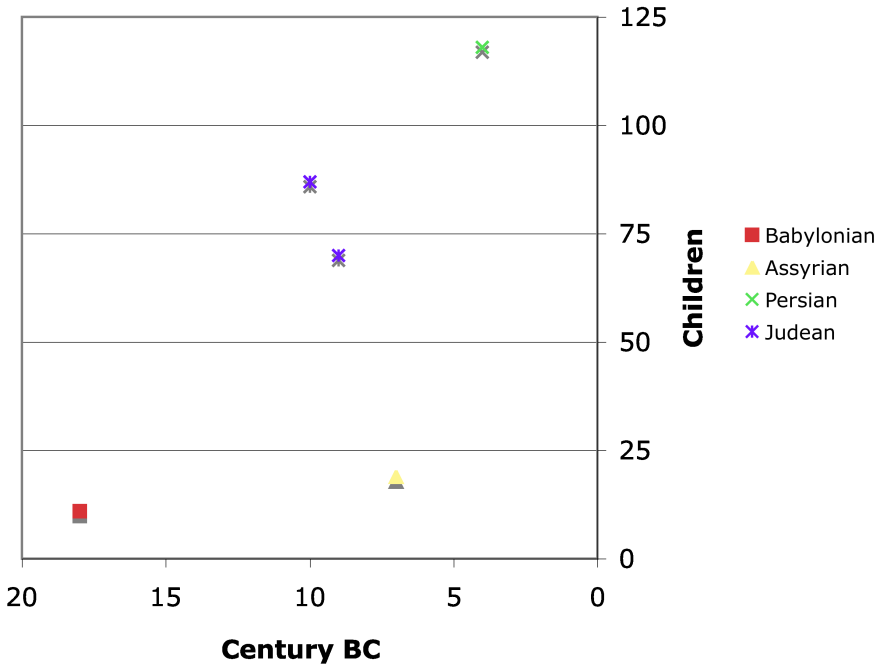


Table 1. Women and children of Sumerian (Su), Assyrian (A) and Persian (P) kings. S=son; number of daughters is often unknown.

Name	Country	Consorts	Children	Source
Shulgi	Su	?	54?	Sollberger 1954-6 and Gelb 1979
Ashurnasirpal II	A	200	?	Ashurnasirpal II, <i>Annals</i> , Raid through Bît-Adini
Esarhaddon	A	?	19S	Parpola 1983 ii:117-18
Ashurbanipal	A	427		Fales and Postgate 1992, tablets #23-26
Artaxerxes II	P	?	118S	Curtius Quintus, <i>History</i> , x.5 and Justin, <i>Epitome</i> , x.1
Darius III	P	365	?	Quintus Curtius, <i>History</i> , iii.3, vi.6, Justin, <i>Epitome</i> , xii.3, and Plutarch, <i>Artaxerxes</i> , 27

Table 2. Women and children of polygynous patriarchs (P), judges (J), and kings (K). Revised from Betzig 2005.

Name	Period	Consorts	Children	Source
Lamech	P	2	3S, 1D	Gen 4,19-22
Terah	P	2?	3S, 1D	Gen 11,26-29; 12,13; 20,12; 22,20-24
Abraham	P	3+	8S+	Gen 14,14; 16,4-15; 21,2-3; 25,1-2
Nahor	P	2	12S?	Gen 22,20-24; 28,5; 29,5
Ishmael	P	?	12S	Gen 25,13-15
Lot	P	3	2S, 2D	Gen 19,8; 36-38
Esau	P	4?	5S, ?D	Gen 26,34; 28,9; 35,2-14
Jacob	P	4	12S, 1D	Gen 35,22-26; 46,8-27
Eliphaz	P	2	7S	Gen 36,11-15
Simeon	P	2	6-8S	Gen 46,10; Exod 6,15; 1 Chron 4,24
Judah	P	2	5S	Gen 38,2-5. 24-30; 1 Chron 2,3-4
Moses	P	2	2S?	Exod 18,1-4; Num 12,1
Hezron	P	2?	4S?	Gen 46,12; 1 Chron 2,9-21
Caleb	P	6?	12S?, 1D	1 Chron 2,18-24.46-

				50
Jerahmeel	P	2	6S	1 Chron 2,25-26.42
Asshur	P	2?	8S	1 Chron 2,24; 4,5-7
Manasseh	P	2?	7S	Gen 46,20; Jos 17,1-6; 1 Chron 7,14
Machir	P	2?	2S?, 2D?	1 Chron 7,14-19
Mered	P	2	6S	1 Chron 4,17-18
Shimei	P	?	16SD, 6D	1 Chron 4,27
Shaharaim	P	3	9S	1 Chron 8,8-9
Gideon	J	“many”	72S	Jdg 6,35; 8,30-31
Jair	J	?	30S	Num 32,41; Jdg 10,4
Gilead	J	2	6S	Num 26,30-32; Jdg 11,1-2
Ibzan	J	?	30S, 30D	Jdg 12,8-9
Abdon	J	?	40S	Jdg 12,13-14; 1 Chron 8,23
Samson	J	4?	?	Jdg 14,2; 15,2; 16,1,4
Elkanah	J	2	5S?, 2D	1 Sam 1,1-2; 2,12-21
Saul	K	“wives”	7S?, 2D	1 Sam 14,49; 2 Sam 3,7; 12,8; 21,8; 1 Chron 8,33; 9,39
David	K	10+	19S, 1D	1 Sam 8,27; 2 Sam 3,2-5;

				5,13-16; 1 Chron 3,1-9; 14,4-7
Solomon	K	1000	1S, 2D	1 Kgs 4,11-14; 11,3; 1 Chron 3,10-24
Rehoboam	K	78	28S, 60D	2 Chron 11,21
Abijah	K	14	22S, 16D	2 Chron 13,21
Ahab	K	“wives”	70S	1 Kgs 20,3-7; 2 Kgs 10,1
Jehroam	K	“wives”	?	2 Chron 21,14.17
Joash	K	2	?	2 Chron 24,3
Josiah	K	2	2S	2 Kgs 23,30-36
Jehoiachin	K	“wives”	7S	2 Kgs 24,15
Zedekiah	K	“wives”	Ss	Jer 38,23

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