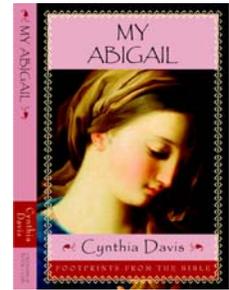


My Abigail, by Cynthia Davis

ISBN 978-1-58288-269-7



Chapter 1

“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the LORD is God. We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. The LORD is good,” I sang as my brother and I skipped along the road.

We were taking lunch to Abel and my uncle Bezer in the fields.

“How do you think of all the words?” Joel asked. “I could not ever think of something to sing about.”

“They just come to me,” I tried to explain. “The Holy One gives me the words. Music is like a conversation with the One God.”

“Are you ‘fraid?” the boy was a little awed.

“Why would I be afraid?” puzzled I looked at my brother. “The Living God is as near as the trees around us.”

“I think Abigail makes beautiful music,” faithfully my friend Elizabeth spoke up. “It is a gift. Can you make me a song?”

“The words do not come from me,” I tried to explain. “When I feel close to God, then sometimes music comes into my mind.”

I wished I could grant her request because I felt sorry for my best friend. Her mother died when she was born. My parents encouraged me to spend time in the fields with Joel and my best friend. They tried to give her the affection and freedom she did not get from her father.

“I do not know how to convince that child she is loved,” once I heard Mother confide to my Father. “Hosea with his laws will not let Elizabeth have any fun. I think it is only when she visits here that the little girl gets to play at all.”

The man was stern. From him Abel learned to condemn my music. Every day he sat with the sons of Hosea to be instructed in writing and the laws of Moses. In exchange my friend Elizabeth learned womanly skills from my mother.

Abel frowned at me when we reached the flock. “Girls should be learning women’s tasks.”

“Father says it is good for me to play in the fields,” I informed the young man haughtily. “Besides, here is your lunch.”

“My boy, I have heard your parents tell the children to play in the fields,” Bezer delighted in teasing. He grinned toothlessly. “All your learning is making you old before your time.”

Abel pressed his lips together and looked toward the road. I knew he was angry.

“We are going home,” I told the two men.

“Why do you waste your time with this thing,” my brother snatched my harp out of my hands before I took a step.

It was a simple instrument fashioned from a curved branch and thin silver wire carefully unwound from a braided chain I owned. It gave poor music and the wires grew shorter each time they broke. Still, I loved the accompaniment when I sang.

“Give it to me!” I shrieked and tried to retrieve my possession.

“You are only a girl and do not need such things,” coldly the young man held it away from me.

“Leave Abigail alone,” Bezer defended me. “You can speak to your parents tonight. Let her have her toy, now. You are frightening the sheep.”

I was half afraid my brother would break the harp, but he handed it to me with the promise, “I will talk to father tonight.”

All the way home, I clung to the instrument. Joel and Elizabeth were silent. I wrapped the harp in the gown I wore only for special feasts so that Abel could not find it.

“Father, do you not see that a girl cannot understand the worship of God. Hosea says that a woman should not waste time making up songs. That is a task for the priests. I have learned...” the sixteen year old addressed Ezra as soon as the meal was over.

“You have learned much foolishness,” his reply was sharp. “Let your sister make songs to the Almighty. She does no harm.”

“My words praise the True God!” I shouted at my brother. “How dare you suggest that I would shame our father?”

“Your sister glorifies the Living God with her music as much as you do with your prayers.” Mother agreed.

“Next you will want to act as the Philistine women who do not cover their hair,” my brother turned on me.

“You will not speak so to your sister,” my father frowned. “She has a gift from the Almighty. What Abigail does is not shameful. I will speak to Hosea.”

I never knew what passed between the two men. Abel no longer chastised me for singing. Elizabeth continued to come to my home and Hosea spent part of each day teaching the secrets of writing on the soft clay tablets to my brother and his sons.

Hosea was respected as the only man in Maon who could write. The marks he made on the soft clay tablets to record important events seemed almost magical. If my father or some other man needed an official record of a sale or marriage document, they pressed their personal seal into the soft clay before it was baked. Only when the transaction needed to be kept forever was the tablet fired. Otherwise Hosea simply smoothed out the markings and reused the clay.

Not long after my eighth birthday a messenger came from the north. Hosea called all the men together. Father was anxious when he returned. I was busy with making a neat loaf of bread and did not pay much attention to the conversation.

“Samuel has called for a meeting of the leaders of every tribe,” the man sighed. “Bezer and I will go with Hosea bar Dan to Ramah.”

“Why must you go?” Mother argued. “Ezra, surely someone else can make the long journey.”

“It is fitting that I represent Maon.” The man frowned at her worry. “My fathers have dwelt in this town since Joshua established the allotment to the families of Judah. Hosea, too, is descended from the earliest settlers. Abel will go with us. He has been a man for five years but has never had a chance to participate in the counsels of Israel.”

“Who will tell me the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Exodus and...” I clung to my father weeping when I realized he was going away.

I loved to hear of the acts of the Holy One of Israel. When my father told the stories, he made them come alive in my imagination. For special occasions everyone in Maon gathered near our gates to hear him chant the sacred texts.

“I will return, my child,” he assured me with a pat on the head.

Abel strode off beside my father and uncle beside Hosea. He walked proudly.

“I think he has grown a head taller overnight,” Elizabeth whispered to me. At ten she was already beginning to think about her future with a husband. “Your brother is a handsome man.”

Everyone in Maon watched them leave. It was a moon turning before the men returned. Even then the discussions were meaningless to me.

“Samuel has given in to the demands for a king,” My father grumbled. ‘The One God has been our protector and guide since the time of Abraham. We do not need a king like the other nations. There are already too many who no longer trust the Living God. ‘You are old and your sons do not obey you or the Lord,’ was the complaint. It was only an excuse to do what they want rather than listen to the words of the prophets who speak for God.”

“Brother, did you not hear of the actions of the sons of Samuel. They are worse than those of Eli before him,” Bezer sneered.

“There is no need to discuss such things. The Holy One will raise up a new prophet,” declared my father sternly. “The elders of Israel did not even listen to Samuel. He warned of the cost of a king.”

“Cost?” Somewhat hesitantly Mother questioned the men.

“Samuel claims that a king will demand a tenth of all things,” again my uncle replied in scornful tone.

“A tenth already goes to the Lord,” Father frowned at his brother. “It is another reason that we do not need a king.”

I grew tired of the argument and wandered away to play. Life in Maon resumed the daily pace. Seasons passed with smooth regularity. Fields were planted and harvested. Sheep were born, sheared, and eventually sold. Word drifted to us that Samuel and Saul the son of Kish met. Two years later he ordered conscription of our young men to fight the Philistines and help someplace called Jabesh-Gilead.

“So will it be done to the one who does not help Saul,” the messenger called loudly.

Everyone in Maon hurried to hear the news. From behind Mother I stared at the dusty man holding a bloody haunch over his head. Then I hid my face in her skirt.

“We will go home,” she announced. “This is not a place for women and girls.”

Hosea responded, “We will go up to Saul.”

My father and uncle argued long into the night. At last Bezer agreed to stay behind. After he left I heard my parents talking.

“I do not want to serve in battle,” Father tried to reassure Mother. “We must respond and help our kin.”

“The men of Jabesh-Gilead are not related to us,” she argued.

“They are brothers because they too are children of Israel,” the man tried to convince her.

“Pah!”

I was surprised by the scornful response. Then the woman rushed away. I was sure she was weeping.

“Let me go with you,” Abel begged.

“I will not cause your mother more grief,” harshly Father refused. “You and your uncle will keep the flocks.”

In the morning she loaded a pack. With her lips pressed together she watched Father march away with Hosea and others from Maon. I never saw my mother cry until the men returned. Hosea brought my father in a litter behind a donkey.

“Ezra,” the shriek made me leap to my feet.

Elizabeth and I ran from the house. At first I thought my father was dead because Mother lay across his body wailing hysterically.

“The sword cut my knee. I will heal,” over the woman’s keening Father tried to be heard.

“At least you will never have to fight again,” after the man was settled on his pallet with herbs and bandages encasing his leg, she was able to relax.

“My father told me that the Philistines were defeated,” Elizabeth announced a few days later.

“Do you think it is true?” I asked remembering other times when someone insisted that our enemies were defeated.

There was peace for a time. My uncle Bezer left home to fight with King Saul against the Philistines when I was eleven.

“He is too old to fight. Let me go instead.” Abel was anxious for adventure and begged his father’s permission.

“Not this time, my son. We need you to keep the flocks,” Father refused. “I am still not well enough for long treks in the fields after the animals.”

Mother wept with relief. “It is enough that my husband cannot walk and my brother has gone. I will not let my son go to war as well.”

Abel stamped around for days after the troops left wearing a frown. Bezer returned with tales of distant lands.

“We came together at Michmash. Thanks to Jonathon bar Saul, Israel won a victory that day. We struck them hand and foot back toward Bethaven. The iron swords of the enemy were no match for the might of Jonathon and Saul. We would have chased them further except for the oath of Saul that not a man should eat,” the old man frowned slightly as he spoke. “It was a foolish command.”

“What is the king like?” Mother wanted to know.

Her brother reported. “He is a tall man. When Saul walks through the camp it is easy to see him because he stands a head over everyone else. It is no wonder that God told Samuel to anoint him our king.”

“I remember you said you were there for the ceremony,” Aunt Rebecca smiled.

Bezer nodded, “I was at Mizpah trading some of our wool. Members of the tribes were gathered for a feast. The annual clamor arose for a king like the nations around us. Samuel stood up. He was not intimidated.”

I leaned forward to hear the story. Even though my father looked irritated he did not interrupt. It was unusual for Bezer to share anything of interest. Usually he made unpleasant comments about our neighbors and even the king or dozed in the sun after drinking a skin of wine. The old man smiled at the expectant silence.

My uncle resumed his tale after a deep draught from the pitcher of barley beer. “The prophet stood there on a hill looking at us all. Finally he spoke. ‘Let me tell you what a king will be like,’ he said. Then he warned us that our sons would serve in the army and that we would pay taxes to support the royal way of life.”

“Samuel was right,” Mother muttered under her breath. “My family is torn asunder to serve in the army. Praise to the Holy One that Ezra is healing and Bezer has returned safely.”

“After all the warnings, though,” the old man continued with a grin that was more like a sneer. “Even after Samuel told us what it would be like to have a king, the men shouted for a king. ‘We want to be like the other nations.’ I remember how sad Samuel looked.”

I was surprised that my uncle looked downcast himself. Then he shrugged.

“We have gotten what we wanted. Samuel gave in to the pleading after one last caution, ‘YHWH is the only ruler you should desire. The Holy One saves you from all danger, but you have rejected God.’ Then he made a great show of choosing Saul.”

“A great show?” Abel looked confused. “Hosea said that Samuel anointed Saul at Ramah after he went searching for some donkeys.”

Bezer shrugged again, “I have heard that, too. All I know is what I saw at Mizpah. Samuel had the elders from each tribe present come forward. The tribe of Benjamin was chosen by lot. A representative from each family of Benjamin had to step out. Samuel consulted the Urim and Thurim again and declared that the household of Matri was chosen. Then the lot fell to Kish bar Abiel. ‘Where is your son, Saul?’ Samuel asked the old man.”

My uncle paused to take another gulp from the nearby pitcher of watered beer. I held my breath until he resumed the story. It was nearly as exciting as the sagas my father told of the Exodus and Conquest.

“Kish was speechless. All he could do was shake his head and look around. Samuel made another show of consulting the Lord. Then he said, ‘Look for Saul among the packs.’ When several men ran they found the young man. He acted quite reluctant even when Samuel stood beside him and announced. ‘Do you see the one chosen by God? There is no one like him.’ We all cheered because he was a good looking man, strong and taller than the prophet by two cubits.”

“The king is broad shouldered and a powerful warrior,” Ezra attested.

“We all went to our homes after the celebration. I will never again see such a ceremony. It is good that the king has shown himself able to bring victory to the forces of Israel.” Bezer concluded with a wide yawn. “There were some who complained that Saul was not worthy of being king. After this victory there were some who wanted to punish or even kill the detractors. Saul said, ‘Today the Lord brought victory. No one shall be killed.’ We followed Saul and Samuel to Gilgal for a ceremony of reconciliation. I have never seen so many sacrifices.”

“I am just glad we can celebrate your return,” Mother swiped at a tear.

Rebecca nodded. I saw her dab her own eyes. I followed when the women hurried away to prepare food. Not every household was so blessed. Hosea led the thanksgiving for the warriors who returned and mourning for those who did not.

Each moon turning was the reason for some kind of worship either in Maon or at the Pillar of Decision, on the road north. For major festivals people from all the neighboring areas gathered at the Pillar for the celebration. Eagerly I listened to the music. The drumming echoed in my blood until I thought I would burst. Sometimes in the shadows I imitated the older girls in their ritual movements. I longed for the time when I could join in the ecstatic dances during the harvest and at Passover.

“My little sister will be a woman before many seasons pass,” Abel remarked after the harvest festival. “It is time that she learned the ways of women and quit the play of a child. When you are a wife, you will not have time for walks in the fields and tunes on your harp.”

I wanted to argue but my father spoke.

“Your brother is right in saying that you should spend more time at home. It is time for you to learn a woman’s tasks. I see no harm in playing your harp when the tasks are done.”

I sighed with relief at his reprieve. As always, mornings were spent baking or weaving with my mother and Elizabeth.

“It is nice to learn to sew and bake,” I admitted to the woman.

“Yes, my daughter, you will have need for such accomplishments,” she agreed. A few minutes later she took the shuttle from my hand and with a hug she suggested, “take your harp and go to the fields. Make me a new song. You have a great gift, my daughter. Never let anyone stop you from singing.”

When I celebrated my womanhood at thirteen, my parents surprised me with a real three stringed harp. My gasp of amazed delight was answered by a smug smile from my mother.

“You will not have to worry about the wires breaking,” my father explained as if it was his idea, “I have purchased you extras.”

“Thank you!” Overcome, I stroked the beautiful instrument.

“Play something,” Joel seemed more excited than me.

When I plucked each wire in turn, I was enchanted by the clear tones. A chorus welled up. I began to sing the ‘Song of Miriam’. Every child learned to recite the words for the yearly Passover celebration.

“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”

Mother clapped and smiled in delight.

“I think my daughter could calm the mad king better than the shepherd boy from Bethlehem,” boasted my father.

Abel reared back, appalled. “How can you suggest such a thing? King Saul would not find a woman’s music comforting.”

“Who are you talking about?” Joel interrupted.

I leaned forward slightly to listen because I was curious as well.

“Word has gone out from Gibeah that ever since Samuel withdrew from Saul, the king experiences times of...” Father paused as if considering how to continue. Finally he whispered, “Saul is said to fall into extreme rage. A young man from Bethlehem is the only one who can calm the frenzy.”

“How?” When the man paused again, I was still confused.

“He plays a harp and sings,” my father smiled at me. “I am sure that my Abigail could play just as sweetly.”

“My daughter will not go to the court of a madman,” Mother spoke decisively.

“Of course not,” Abel interrupted before Father could respond. “Such a thing is improper. Even the Philistines do not allow women to entertain their lords.”

“Not with singing anyway,” Bezar chuckled with a sneer.

My mother gasped and made an angry hissing sound between her teeth in response to her brother’s remark.

“My daughter will not serve the king.” Her words were measured and her expression was unsmiling.

“My wife, I never planned to offer Abigail as a substitute for David bar Jesse,” Father placated the woman with a pat on the shoulder. “Even though I am sure her playing would rival anyone in Israel.”

“Play something else,” Joel ignored the uncomfortable silence that fell.

With typical nine-year old exuberance he swung from the lintel for a moment then dropped to the cushion beside me. Thoughtful, after my father’s comment, I strummed gently before beginning a short paean of praise that sprang into my mind.

Everyone applauded my composition.

“It is time to eat,” Mother ended my playing with her announcement. “Abigail, come and help me.”

A few minutes later I stood with bowed head and arms crossed over my breast while my father offered longer than usual prayers. My face flushed while he prayed that a husband would be found for me. He asked protection from our neighboring enemies, the marauders from the desert as well as the Philistines who continually threatened the western borders beyond the hills.

“May God strike our enemies with the sword of vengeance so that they no longer come against the children of Israel,” he concluded.

My uncle was unusually rancorous when we settled to our meal. “When we met at Mizpah to ask Samuel for a king, it was to protect us from the depredations of the Philistines.

Still they come against us. Even Jezreel, less than a day's journey west has fallen prey to the Philistines. Now you say he has become a mad man as well. These are dark days for Israel."

"This is not conversation for my daughter's special day," Father frowned his brother-in-law into silence. "God would raise up a champion as in the days of Gideon and Deborah if we had not put our trust in a man."

The two men stared at each other. Bezer nodded and shrugged. Father reached for a piece of bread.

"I have something for Abigail!" Joel burst out. "I almost forgot!"

The boy gulped and lowered his head when all the adults turned to look at him.

"I am sorry," he mumbled before anyone could scold.

"He was just excited," Abel surprised me with his defense of the child. "I too have a gift for my sister."

"It is fortunate that we are a family gathering," Father tried to look stern. He could not contain the smile, "It is not everyday that we celebrate such a special day."

"Here it is," Joel held out a loosely wrapped bundle.

Putting aside my thoughts, I took the gift. The burlap slipped off easily to disclose a carved comb.

"This is beautiful," I stroked the smooth wood.

"I made it myself. It is to hold your hair back," proudly the boy explained.

Joel knew how often I pushed the heavy locks away from my forehead when I was concentrating on getting a tune just right. It was frustrating when the brown strands tangled themselves in the strings of my harp. I refused to braid it though. I loved the way my hair felt when the wind turned it into a banner. The breezes always reminded me of the breath of the Living God moving across the land.

"It is perfect," immediately I slipped it into my long wavy hair. "This will help keep my hair out of my face."

"My gift is also for your hair," Abel laid his present in my lap.

I opened the small wooden box to find a set of bronze hairpins.

"They are lovely," I picked up one of the pins. Twisting it between my fingers I admired the sheen and the small stone inset at the top.

"They will be perfect when you are wed and wear your hair as befits a woman," my brother informed me.

"Truly I expect the next celebration will be when Abigail is betrothed." Father grinned happily.

His words reminded me that marriage would soon follow now that I was a woman. I would have to leave the security of my home for life with a man of my father's choosing. I shivered although it was spring. Two of my friends were recently wed. Hannah's father chose old Benjamin bar Isaac. The man had white streaks in his brown beard already. He also had a daughter and two small sons by his recently deceased wife.

“It will not be so bad,” my friend had smiled at my aghast cry. “Benjamin has many servants. He is a kind man.”

“I hope my father chooses a young man,” still I was not convinced that she could be happy.

“Beware what you wish for,” my aunt Rebecca overheard our conversation. “I would prefer a kind old man to a young man who shouts.”

“Or worse, beats you,” Hannah bent close to whisper her warning.

I knew she referred to our playmate. Tirza married a year earlier. Although she tried to conceal the bruises behind her veil, everyone knew her husband beat the woman.

“It is to be expected. Her father should have known better than to wed his daughter to an Amalekite,” mother was vehement in her ideas.

“I hear it was a large dowry that decided the issue,” my aunt shared the current gossip avidly.

“No money would pay my husband for such a man to wed our Abigail,” Mother defended me.

I hoped she was right. Father was particular about his requirements for my husband. None of the men in Maon seemed to satisfy him. The rainy season was upon us before he called me to his side.

“Abigail,” the man lounged against cushions in the main room of our house.

I spent part of the morning arranging them to my satisfaction. Now they were disordered. With a suppressed sigh I stood quiet

“Yes, my father,” I waited, wondering why he studied my so earnestly.

“You are an accomplished young woman. Everyone knows of your talent with the harp. It is not something that most men look for in a wife, but your children will benefit. You know how to bake bread and your goat cheese is the envy even of your mother. She assures me that despite the time you spend roaming the fields that you are accomplished at the loom, too.” The man paused.

“Yes, my father?” I could not understand why my attributes were being recited.

“Add to your accomplishments beauty and a quick mind,” my father smiled and nodded as if making a decision. “Any man would be fortunate to take you as wife.”

My heart began to thud slowly and my mouth suddenly felt dry.

“My father?” I could barely speak the two words when he looked expectantly at me.

“You are a fortunate young woman,” an expansive grin appeared.

He stood to rest his hands on my shoulders. I waited, unable to speak or move now that I understood where the conversation was leading.

“Nabal of Carmel has spoken to me about taking you to his home.”

When my father sighed I was not sure if it was contentment or resignation that prompted the breath. He waited for a response. I stood silent.

“Nabal is wealthy. He is not old yet has amassed a fortune equal to a sheik of the desert.” When I said nothing, Father elaborated. “With shrewd dealings he has added to his wealth. The man is well thought of by the king himself. That will give you security even if I would prefer someone who put his trust in the Almighty and not in a man.”

I tried to picture my proposed husband. Eventually I remembered a short man with close-set eyes. He was seen sometimes at the festivals held at the Pillar of Decision between Maon and Carmel. Rich garments clothed the man although his short stature did not show off the robes to the advantage he might desire. The finely spun cloth bespoke wealth as much as the ever present bodyguard. He was always surrounded by several burly servants to protect his possessions from any threat. Nabal looked almost comical because of his lack of height, but I had observed servants hurry to do his bidding.

“The man has pastures from Carmel to the Wilderness of Paran. His shepherds roam the mountainsides near Maon. There are the herds of camels he raises as well. Every luxury will be yours, my daughter.” Father drew me close in an uncharacteristic hug. “Nabal will arrive the day after the Sabbath to discuss the letters of betrothal.”

“Yes, my father,” I doubted that the man heard my low reply when he hurried away. I stood for a long time trying to imagine myself as a bride. It was impossible. Instead I distracted myself by arranging the pillows again.