

ABIGAIL AND ABEL'S WISE WOMAN: COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

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The biblical worldview is both androcentric and patriarchal. Women do not generally hold positions at the top of the political hierarchy nor with the exception of such figures as Deborah and Jael, do they generally play military roles. Nonetheless they can be powerful and decisive figures, manifesting their agency in different ways. In the early days of the monarchy, at the end of the eleventh/early tenth centuries BCE two such persons are Abigail of Maon (I Samuel 25) and Abel of Beth-maacah's Wise Woman (II Samuel 20). As Abigail successfully defends and protects the wellbeing of her family and property, so does Abel's Wise Woman defend and protect the body politic of her people. Yet both also subtly move themselves from their implicit alliance with opponents of David's claims to obedience to supporters who distance themselves from those who challenge David's legitimacy. Both discourage David and his men from exercising indiscriminate violence and yet offer other ways to achieve the same violent ends of eliminating the challenges to his authority.

In both cases these women use rhetorical suasion but they do so without explicit trickery. Both act to protect and preserve themselves and their household or community.¹ To achieve that end, each is willing to betray loyalty to a rebellious and foolish man. In Abigail's case this is her husband Nabal, and in the case of Abel, it is the guest Sheba who declared a revolt against David's

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rule who may be claiming sanctuary from the town of Beth-maacah or perhaps support as an ally in the revolt of the northern tribes. One plays out on the micro level, the other on the macro; one is personal, and the other political. In each case the protagonist chooses sides and declares loyalty to the assailant, while forestalling the catastrophe. In the case of Abigail and pre-monarchic David, it is explicit. With the Wise Woman of Abel in her interchange with the military general, Joab (King David's representative) this choice is implied, if not actually declared. In each case the woman addresses the aggressor who threatens her and her community. Each woman makes the violence of forced submission unnecessary though they do not advocate pacific values in and of themselves. We see in these two examples the powerful agency of women within their limited positions as advisors to the royalty reflecting the wisdom tradition, not unlike Jonadab (II Samuel 13:3), Ahithophel (II Samuel 16:20), and Hushai (II Samuel 15:34). Beyond advice, in the case of the Wise Woman, she also exercises political power in the killing of Sheba. In the first case (Abigail) David is a novice regional chieftain on his way up the ladder to monarchical pretensions; in the latter (Abel) David is an aging veteran monarch desperately trying to hold on to royal power and maintain national unity in a series of civil wars. A great many more verses are dedicated to the narrative of Abigail in I Samuel 25 than the Woman of Abel in II Samuel 20. Much more is known about Abigail and her domestic circumstances, including those before meeting David, then her actual encounter with him, when and what she says to Nabal, and finally that she becomes David's wife. Abigail's meeting with David is in the private sphere; Abel's Wise Woman with Joab is a public encounter, yet both of them contribute to the consolidation of David's rule.

COMPARISONS

There are seven overlapping matters or parallel kinds of wording that connect these two narratives.

1. Placement in the book/Earlier relevant history

In each case, the chapter comes toward the end of the book, I Samuel 25 out of 31 chapters; II Samuel 20 out of 24 chapters. The earlier narrative is preceded by the somewhat tumultuous events that lead from the time of the judges (Samuel although a priest and a prophet is also the final judge in Israel), and through the difficult days of Saul's monarchy. The later narrative closes out

the history of David recovering from divine punishment and disastrous civil wars thereby regaining his empire that is now ready to be transferred to his son.

2. DEFENSE FROM IMMINENT VIOLENCE

Abigail acts to defend herself and her family from the imminent and indiscriminate violence which faces them. David and four hundred of his warriors are on the warpath; they are armed with swords. Their goal is to annihilate Nabal and his possessions for the slight David feels that he has suffered (I Sam. 25:21-22). In a similar manner, the Wise Woman of Abel acts to defend herself and her besieged community. Each case involves a spokesperson representing the whole, and in each case this is not the man who began the revolt, but a woman who seeks reconciliation and renewed fealty to David by suggesting a less violent resolution of the tensions. Earlier, the instigator of violence is David, a rebel against the rule of King Saul, and more immediately furious that he has not only been unpaid for his protection services (vv. 15-16) but also that Nabal has dismissed and denigrated him as a nobody (vv. 10-11). In the latter situation, Joab threatens violence because Sheba ben Bikhri led a revolt against his ruler, King David, and now Sheba has sought refuge in Abel Beth-maacah.

3. VERBAL LINKS

There are certain verbal links between these two episodes. Nabal dismisses David and his request with the derogatory words, "Who is David, Who is the son of Jesse ... there are many slaves nowadays who run away from their masters" (I Sam. 25:10). Sheba ben Bikhri proclaims, "We have no portion in David, no share in Jesse's son" (II Sam. 20:1). Nabal is termed as someone nasty or ill-natured (*ben-beliya-al* (I Sam. 25:17; *ish ha-beliya-al*, v. 25). Sheba ben Bikhri is described with the same latter words (*ish beliya-al*, II Sam. 20:1). The heroines share similar encomia. Abigail is *intelligent* (*ha-isha tovat sekhel*, I Sam. 25:3) and the Abel woman is *wise* (*isha hakhama*, II Sam. 20:16). In terms of the other women in David's life, none is characterized as intelligent or wise. Merab never speaks to David; Michal is cunning in her trickery, but patently unwise in her comments to him in Jerusalem. At the time of the succession of Solomon Bathsheba is politically astute but only under the tutelage of Nathan the prophet (I Kgs. 1:11-14). She follows his wise advice and acts

to save her life and that of Solomon, but again, she is neither termed intelligent nor wise unlike Solomon (I Kgs. 2:6, 9). In fact King Solomon rebukes his mother for her naivete in supporting Adonijah's rebellious request to marry Abishag (I Kgs. 2:22). Both Michal and Bathsheba lose their husbands to the imperial designs of King David, yet neither protests. Bathsheba pointedly says nothing to dissuade David from the greatest mistake of his reign – murdering the innocent and loyal Uriah, while Abigail succeeds in dissuading David from killing Nabal who is guilty of being disloyal to David who considers himself rightfully or not to be a benefactor of Nabal.

When addressing the man in charge of the imminent threat, David and Joab respectively, the woman refers to herself in relationship to this man as “your maidservant” (Abigail: *amatkha*, your servant – 25:24, [twice], 28, 31, 41, and she also uses the synonym *shifhatkha* in v. 27). The Wise Woman of Abel: *amatekha*, 20:17). Abigail is called *tovat sekhel* (I Sam. 25:3) and the Woman of Abel's political persuasion is identified with a synonym of wisdom (*isha hakhama*, II Sam. 20:16 and *b'ḥokhmata*, II Sam. 20:22).

Nabal's heart figuratively dies within him (*vayamot libo b'kirbo*, I Sam. 25:37), and Sheba's severed skull (*rosh Sheva*, II Sam. 20:22) is thrown over the wall and Joab sounds the horn and departs, leaving the town intact. The verbal link here are references to the physical body.

4. CONCEPTUAL LINKS

Each woman makes a specific reference to the deity. Abigail predicts that God will favor David and grant him a long legacy because he is fighting God's battles (*milhamot YHWH*, I Sam. 25:28). The Wise Woman accuses Joab of seeking to destroy God's possession (*nahalat YHWH*, II Sam. 20:19). As Abigail's words are described as prophetic, so too are the words of the Wise Woman of Abel.²

5. SELF-MOTIVATED

In the case of Abigail, the text is clear; she acts on her own volition, “she did not tell her husband Nabal” (I Sam. 25:19). With the Wise Woman of Abel the matter is less clear, but without doubt she represents and speaks for the citizenry of Abel. She self-describes as “one of those who seek the welfare of the faithful in Israel” (v. 19). Following her negotiation with Joab, the woman goes to the people in Abel and shares “her wise plan” and they successfully act on

it (II Sam. 20:19, 22). Both with Joab and her own city she persuades them to follow her advice.

6. DISTANCING ONESELF FROM THE "REBEL"

Abigail initially associates herself with Nabal (understanding Nabal here as someone who has rebelled against the authority of the local warlord, David) even though she disparages her husband, "he is just what his name says: his name means 'boor' and he is a boor" (I Sam. 25:25). In effect she says, he may be a boor, but he is still my husband, my problem, my boor. Abigail soon changes her tactics and distances herself from her husband. In the very next verse she says to David, "let your enemies ... fare like Nabal." The Wise Woman of Abel also identifies with the city under attack but she distances herself from Sheba from the very beginning of her dialogue. She makes no defense of his presence.

7. NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE LEADER OF THE THREATENING FORCE; MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Abigail directly, one-on-one negotiates and placates David. In a similar fashion the Wise Woman directly, one-on-one negotiates and placates David's general, Joab. These women admirably accomplish their mission. Both David and then later Joab retreat, their honor intact, and without causing any direct bloodshed.

CONTRASTS

And yet there are also seven substantial differences:

1. Describing Abigail / Abel's Wise Woman

Abigail is described as being "intelligent and beautiful" (or good-looking) (*tovat sekhel vifat toar*), and by contrast Nabal is characterized as "a hard man and an evildoer" (I Sam. 25:3). These words address Abigail's intellect as well as her physical qualities. Abel's protagonist is characterized as a Wise Woman (*isha hakhama*, (II Sam. 20:16), someone who is sagacious, sensible and judicious. No words describe her physical being. Abigail is young enough to have a child by David; the implication of Abel's Wise Woman is that she is a woman of mature years.

2. TALK AND ACTION

Abigail's speech, the longest by any woman in the Bible, is filled with praise of David. She flatters him outrageously; she is loquacious. By contrast, in terms of the Wise Woman, her "language is to the point, assertive and pithy."³ Abigail takes no *active* part in the violence to eliminate Nabal, while in Abel the woman instigates violence.

3. A MATTER OF LOYALTY

Abigail declares her allegiance to David as king-to-be, but in Abel although they act loyally by killing Sheba ben Bikhri, they are silent about declaring their loyalty to David and his throne.

4. QUID PRO QUO

Abigail the wealthy and beautiful woman (and soon-to-be widow) hints that she will make herself available as a prize to David who will marry her without David needing to kill her husband (I Sam. 25:31, 42) as later he would have Uriah killed in order to marry Bathsheba. There is no such future reward for the Woman of Abel for she already possesses high status as one who seeks the welfare of Israel (I Sam. 20:19) and who saves her city.

5. TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Abigail takes moral responsibility for the insults to David (I Sam. 25:24), whereas the woman of Abel does not take responsibility for welcoming Sheba to her town.

6. ASSERTING AUTHORITY AGAINST REBELS

There is some real ambiguity as to the political position of the town of Abel. Was the Woman of Abel protecting innocent lives or was she instead trying to save guilty ones? Perhaps Abel potentially was in the rebel camp of northern tribes, but when faced with its being razed and its inhabitants killed, it changed allegiances. It is unambiguous that Sheba went to Abel Beth-maacah. II Samuel 20:14 says that all the Beerites went inside with him. It is likely that Beerites should be Bikhrites.⁴ Did this mean that the community of Abel was known to be sympathetic to Sheba's cause? II Samuel 20:2 indicates that "all the men of Israel left David and followed Sheba ben Bikhri." That Joab seems content

to leave Abel Beth-maacah after Sheba's death, and that the citizens of Abel were openly complicit in Sheba's death, suggests that Abel was not a hotbed of rebellion. As in the case of David and Nabal, David (here represented by Joab) "must refrain from blotting his record with unnecessary bloodshed ... he must keep his personal fingerprints off the violent deaths of his personal enemies."⁵

7. FOLLOWING THE IMMEDIATE ENCOUNTER

Following her encounter with David, Abigail returns to her home. Nabal is feasting. He is in a "merry mood and very drunk, so she did not tell him anything at all until daybreak" (I Sam. 25:36). What she tells him appears to have an adverse physical effect upon him. Less than two weeks later, he dies. In short order David learns about his death and comments about it. He then proposes marriage to Abigail, and sends messengers for her. She responds positively and she joins David. These matters add an additional six verses to the chapter. In addition we learn that she has a son by David, Chileab (II Sam. 3:3; also named Daniel, I Chron. 3:1). By contrast, once Sheba's head is thrown over the wall, Joab and his men depart; there is no more mention of Abel's Wise woman.

OPPOSING INDISCRIMINATE VIOLENCE WITH WISE ADVICE; YET NOT PACIFISTS

L. Juliana M. Claassens specifically addresses "Abigail's use of the spoken word in I Samuel 25" yet her description also applies to the Wise Woman of Abel. Their words add "an important perspective to the nature and significance of female resistance in the ... [Hebrew Bible]. Far from being a victim who is helpless to change her own situation as well as the situation of others around her, Abigail's words ... are life-giving in nature. She emerges as the quintessential embodiment of Wisdom, a prime example of what it means to do justice, to show kindness – in the process serving like Woman Wisdom as counselor to kings" in Proverbs.⁶ There in chapter 8, Wisdom self-describes saying, "I, Wisdom live with prudence ... Mine are counsel and resourcefulness ... courage is mine" (Prov. 8:12, 14). Wisdom also says, "I hate ... duplicity in speech" (v. 13).

Yet Claassen's understanding of the ethics of wisdom should be adjusted in light of Michael V. Fox's analysis in *Proverbs 10-31* because he helps to

identify the uniqueness of Abigail's and the Woman of Abel's form of wisdom. Fox notes that "outside Proverbs, wisdom is not inherently ethical power" as we see in Ahithophel and Jonadab but merely "a practical, prudential faculty. It consists of the knowledge and skills that enable a [person] . . . to succeed and thrive." However, in the Book of Proverbs, especially Chapters 1-9, success has no value as wisdom unless it advances "worthy goals"⁷ that include honesty, justice, self-restraint, and a moral and aesthetic balance between deeds and consequences in this world based on fear of God. The method to achieve these goals is intellectual, but it presupposes a wise moral character willing to accept rebuke and correction (Prov. 9:8). Again, Fox explains that a wise person "knows how to adapt [one's] . . . words to the needs of circumstances and to shape them effectively, especially when speaking words of counsel, criticism, and instruction (15:2a, 7a; 16:21, 23; 18:4; 20:15). [The wise person] knows how to calm angry spirits (12:18; 29:8), something that can be done only through speech, and also how to heal and cheer somber souls (12:18b). The wisdom of speech includes the good sense to be silent, as circumstances demand. The wise [person] . . . is restrained and reserved in speech (10:19; 12:23a; 17:27, 28b), even in the face of insult and offense (11:12b)."⁸

Here these two women in David's story give wise prudential and ethical advice in persuasive ways in order to help David build his house and maintain his kingdom, just as Proverbs teaches us that wisdom supports the reign of kings (Prov. 8:12, 14-15). They warn David and Joab against temptations that can undermine their interests (Prov. 1:10; 2:12). In discouraging David from taking vengeance and retribution himself on a malefactor, Abigail represents the wisdom saying that teaches: "Do not say, 'I will repay (evil) with harm'; wait for YHWH and he will give you victory" (Prov. 20:22).⁹

In both examples that of Abigail of Maon and that of the Wise Woman of Abel, these women oppose indiscriminate violence, yet they are not pacifists. Claassens' observes, "even though Abigail is held up as a model of nonviolent resistance, elements in her speech in some sense undermine this portrayal. Her words in verse 29, in which she expresses the wish that David's enemies will be like a pebble in a slingshot, perhaps referring to his most immediate enemy, Nabal, who a couple of verses later indeed will be struck dead by God, offer some disconcerting associations with violence."¹⁰ [Authors' note: the slingshot reference more likely refers to David slaying Goliath.] In Abel, as a response

to the Woman's "clever plan; ... they cut off the head of Sheba ben Bikhri and threw it down to Joab."

CONCLUSION

The narratives concerning Abigail of Maon and the Wise Woman of Abel come relatively early and then fairly late in the turbulent career of biblical David. The two women appear to be quite different: one is relatively young, the other seemingly of mature years, commanding respect in her own personhood. Yet there are compelling connections between these two women. Both of them when confronted with a crisis leap into action. They see a problem and realizing that they are in a position to change what appears to be a forthcoming disaster, they come forward and assume responsibility, confronting the aggressor and his forces before he/they can wreak irreparable harm. These women take charge. Through their presence and their wise suasion they subject their will upon others, but in the name of a moral and wisdom stance that opposes indiscriminate violence as counterproductive, damaging to one's reputation, and opposed to God's plan and values. Abigail of Maon acts with due haste, leaving her home to go and confront the danger posed by a furious David. She courageously and successfully defends and protects her family and property. Abel's Wise Woman also acts with alacrity. In her case she literally stands her ground, confronting Joab and his forces, who are intent on laying siege to her community. She too, protects and defends her people. These women, each in her own way, uses rhetorical suasion successfully to achieve their goals. They do so without having to resort to explicit trickery. Not only do they preserve and protect their own, but they allow David to maintain his reputation by avoiding extended violence and needless bloodshed.

NOTES

1. There are other women in David's life, but they have a very different relationship with him. Merab, Saul's daughter never has direct communication with David. She is promised to him but she then is wedded to Adriel the Meholathite (I Sam. 18:19). Saul's daughter Michal is in love with David and marries him. Initially she saves his life when Saul wishes to kill David (I Sam. 18:20, 27; 19:11-12). Later she is taken from David and given to Paltiel ben Laish (I Sam. 25:44). Still later, she is very critical of David's behavior when he brings the Ark to Jerusalem (II Sam. 6:20-23). Bathsheba initially is taken by David, and bears his child, who subsequently dies (II Sam. 11:4-5, 27; 12:15-18. Late in David's life Bathsheba joins Nathan to see that David's and her son, Solomon, will be named David's successor (I Kgs. 1:15-31).

2. “Abigail recognizes David as the future king of Israel. Her prescience is a clear indication that Abigail is God’s chosen prophet-intermediary.” Alice Bach. “The Pleasure of Her Text,” *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts*, Alice Bach, ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 29. Abigail is “apparently at least quasi-prophetic.” Benjamin J. M. Johnson. “Character as Interpretive Crux in the Book of Samuel,” *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel* (Eds. K. Bodner and B. J. M. Johnson), (London: T&T Clark, 2020), p. 8. In rabbinic tradition, Abigail is one of the seven women prophets: BT *Megillah* 14a.

The Wise Woman of Abel’s “speech ... is very similar to the ... beginning of prophetic oracles (where we can find ... instructions ... to listen = be obedient.” J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses, Vol. 1* (Aasen: The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1981), p. 332.

3. Fokkelman, p. 334.

4. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel. OTL*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 369; P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *II Samuel, Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), p. 428.

5. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes. *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Book of Samuel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 61.

6. L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament*. (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical, 2016), p. 28. In this work, Claassens’ direct reference is to Abigail and Rizpah, one of Saul’s concubines (II Sam. 21). Her description, however, applies also to the Wise Woman of Abel who appears literally in the prior chapter in Samuel.

7. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, AYB 18b, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 925, 924-25.

8. Ibid. pp. 925-26.

9. Ibid. p. 964. Fox translation, adjusted.

10. Claassens, p. 30.