

THE ROLE OF ABIGAIL IN 1 SAMUEL 25

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Introduction

One of the most intriguing stories featured in the life of David is the drama of Abigail's role in 1 Sam 25, in which she prevents the death of her husband and teaches David a valuable lesson. The literary structure of this story reveals much more than the simple story suggests.

This study will focus on the literary importance of Abigail among the three principal characters of the story.¹ Her role, which epitomizes the literary quality of contrast, will be investigated by examining the narrator's characterization of Nabal and Abigail (1 Sam 25:3) and by contrasting her words and actions with Nabal and David. This account is not accidental or merely a "romantic idyll";² rather, Abigail is the wisdom by which folly is highlighted. Thus, she commands the spotlight, since all the cast members (including the servants) interact only with her, making her pivotal role unmistakable. Second, we will examine the placement of 1 Sam 25 between Saul's pursuit of David (1 Sam 24) and Saul's death (1 Sam 26-31).

The Narrator's Characterization of Abigail and Nabal (1 Sam 25:3)

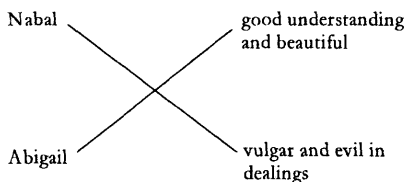
From the outset, the narrator regards Abigail positively and Nabal negatively. In the Hebrew Bible, it is unusual to find the wife depicted as being superior to her husband; thus this story serves as a striking example of feminine superiority.³ In 1 Samuel, only five other women are mentioned. Peninnah and Hannah are mentioned in light of their fertility and infertility (1 Sam 1-2). Phinehas's unnamed wife died in childbirth (1 Sam 4:19-22). Michal, Saul's daughter, was given to David for the purpose of providing Saul an opportunity

¹Adele Berlin describes three levels of characterization in the historical literature: the agent, about whom nothing is known except the barest necessities for the plot and who is part of the setting, a function of the plot; the type, which represents a class of people that share similar traits and characteristics with the agent; and the character, who displays a wider range of traits than the type, and about whom we know more than is necessary for the plot ("Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives," *JOT* 23 [1982]: 69-85, esp. 78).

²John C. Schroeder states that "this story has no connection with the main theme of David's rise to power and Saul's decline" (*I and II Samuel*, IB [Nashville: Abingdon, 1953], 1011).

³John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed: The Story of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 104-105.

to kill him (1 Sam 18:20-28).⁴ The witch of Endor is the last woman mentioned in the book (1 Sam 28). Except for the last, who is linked with evil, all are mentioned in light of their spouses' activities.⁵ Of this group, Abigail is unique. Though she is identified as Nabal's wife (1 Sam 25:3, 14, 19), Nabal is also defined or described in light of his wife: "The man's name was Nabal; and his wife's name Abigail. Now the woman had good understanding (*tobat sékel*); and she was beautiful. But the man was vulgar ("intractable"; *qasésh*) and evil in his dealings" (1 Sam 25:3). The chiasmic structure of the text emphasizes the contrast of their characters.



This contrast is also apparent in the meaning of their names, the identity of their ancestors, and their attitudes.

1. *Names*. Nabal means "fool." The Hebrew word *nabal* indicates more than a "harmless simpleton, but rather a vicious, materialistic, and egocentric misfit."⁶ It seems likely, as Jon D. Levenson has demonstrated, that the villain's "real name was changed for purposes of characterization. The story-teller wants us to know what this fellow is like from the start."⁷ Abigail speaks of Nabal's folly as that which cannot be denied because it is part of the fabric of who he is (1 Sam 25:25b). His character is precisely like his name, foolish. He was following the *kéthib* ("like his heart"; 1 Sam 25:3a).

Abigail, on the other hand, means "my father is joy" or "father's joy." She is described as being of "good understanding" (*skel*; 1 Sam 25:3), which is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where this term is used in relation to a woman. The noun connotes "prudence" and "insight," and "extends to the

⁴In analyzing the marriage of David and Michal, Berlin, 70-71, observes that this "is the only time in the Bible that a woman seems to have chosen a husband instead of the usual pattern of a husband choosing a wife" (1 Sam 18:20-21). She intimates further that David was more motivated by political gain than love, since "it pleased David well to be the king's son-in-law" (1 Sam 18:26).

⁵In a later account (2 Sam 6:20-23), Michal lost her status as David's wife. See Nehama Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 143; cf. J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, JSOTSupp 163 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 34.

⁶Jon D. Levenson, "1 Samuel as Literature and as History," *CBQ* 40 (1978): 13.

⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

whole idea of healthful well-being.⁸ She is, thus, illustrative of the ideal wife.⁹ Phyllis Bird describes her as “intelligent, beautiful, discreet and loyal to her husband (despite his stupidity and boorish character . . .). Prudent, quick-witted, and resourceful, she is capable of independent action.”¹⁰ While Nabal is the proverbial fool, Abigail epitomizes the *‘ēšet bayil* (“stalwart woman”; Prov 31:10).¹¹ It cannot be overlooked that Abigail’s description is “unambiguously laudatory,” while Nabal’s is undoubtedly derogatory.¹²

2. *Ancestry.* Abigail’s ancestry is not provided, although this lack of information is not unusual. The Hebrew wife was often characterized as being a part of her husband’s major possessions (Exod 20:17). Sometimes, as with money, wives were regarded as an index of a man’s wealth.

Nabal’s ancestry, on the other hand, is notable, hailing back to Caleb¹³ and the tremendous faith associated with him (Num 13-14; Deut 1:22-36; Josh 14:6-20). However, in spite of his good and noble ancestry, his character is ignoble and ignominious. By way of contrast, Abigail, in spite of her unstated ancestry, behaves in a noble and refined manner that invites commendation.

3. *Attitude.* The narrator’s introduction also contrasts wealth and avarice with good sense and beauty. Moshe Garsiel notes that “it surely is not accidental that the two personages are characterized by two antonyms, *twbt* = ‘good’ and *r* = ‘bad.’”¹⁴ Nabal is introduced in terms of his possessions, i.e., *what* he had (1 Sam 25:2). Abigail, however, is introduced

⁸Warren C. Trenchard contends that Ben Sira sees *skl* as referring to “the wife’s sensitivity to her husband’s health needs and her ability to provide for them. . . . The object and context of the positive assessment of the wife is in her husband” (*Ben Sira’s View of Women: A Literary Analysis* [Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982], 15).

⁹Berlin, 78, sees her as a type: “She represents the perfect wife.”

¹⁰Phyllis Bird, “Images of Women in the Old Testament,” in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Reuther (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 65.

¹¹P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 401.

¹²Levenson, 18.

¹³The Kethib reads *kēlibbō* (“like his heart”); the Qere understands *kālibbi* (cf. Targ. and Vulgate), a Calebite. The LXX (*anthropos kunikos*) and Syriac denote *keleb* and relate it to the dog-like, shameless character of Nabal (Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC 10 [Waco: Word, 1983], 243). Levenson, 14-15, believes that the Kethib is “an example of scribal sarcasm which alludes to the well-known verse, ‘The fool (*nābāl*) has said in his heart (*bēlibbō*), There is no God’ (Ps 14:1 = 53:1). If so, then the Kethib alludes to the prideful and ultimately stupid character of this man, who seems to have recognized no authority other than his own.”

¹⁴Moshe Garsiel, “Wit, Words, and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25,” in *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, JSOTSupp 92 (Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 163.

in terms of her character, i.e., *who* she was. Her person preceded her possessions. The narrator subtly suggests that *who* you are is more important than *what* you have.

The Wisdom of Abigail with Nabal and David

Nabal was unruly and unkind in spite of David's kindness to him (1 Sam 25:15-16). A "scornful loudmouth" (1 Sam 25:10-11), he heaped scorn on David and offered disingenuity for generosity (1 Sam 25:10-11), unkindness for kindness (1 Sam 25:15), and ingratitude for gratitude (1 Sam 25:21). Nabal was shameless. David provided protection for his flocks at no expense, and it would be expected that Nabal would have happily rewarded this kindness. David's request was reasonable, legitimate, and in harmony with the custom of the times. But Nabal was a fool, who invited retaliation, revenge, and death. It is precisely this sin of refusing to provide for the needs of the unfortunate that characterizes the *nābāl* ("the fool"; cf. Isa 32:6). The servant who explained the situation and appealed to Abigail also serves to highlight the differences between Abigail and Nabal. He recognized the folly of his master's action, and his youthfulness further underscored Nabal's foolishness. He too places emphasis on Nabal's character by pointing out that Nabal is the "son of Belial," "a nasty fellow"¹⁵ (1 Sam 25:17). In addition, Nabal was also unapproachable, so there was no way to dialogue with him. However, Abigail was reasonable and approachable when the young man appealed directly to her guidance in averting David's anger.¹⁶ This direct and forceful appeal subtly suggests that this may not have been the first time that Nabal was guilty of such foolishness, nor was it the only time that Abigail had to intercede.

By contrast, Abigail's activity demonstrated wisdom and kindness (1 Sam 25:18-19), inviting forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, and life. Everything that her foolish husband brought upon himself, she was able to reverse by her wise action. Nabal's folly is unveiled in his speech (which also belies his action). His response was scornful and derisive: "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? These days there are many slaves who break away from their masters. Should I take my bread, my wine, and my meat which I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men whose place of origin I do not know?" (1 Sam 25:10-11).

This outburst is hardly surprising since it is characteristic of a fool, for "excellent speech does not come from a fool" (Prov 17:7). His questions were insults, demonstrating open disrespect mixed with indignation. His derision was of an extreme and malignant nature. In short, he dismissed David as contemptible and, hence, unworthy of his food. He outrightly rejected David's

¹⁵Ibid., 164.

¹⁶The force of the imperatives is strong: "Now know and see what you will do."

request and David himself, calling him a “worthless hooligan.”¹⁷ In addressing the emissaries, he speaks of “Jesse’s son,” an expression generally used of David in negative ways. When David’s delegation initially approached Nabal, they made their modest request in the name of David, “Nabal’s son,” a display of reverence and respect.¹⁸ By contrast, Nabal’s retort,¹⁹ labeling David “Jesse’s son,” demeaned David as though he was beneath Nabal’s dignity or person. Nabal was insolently abusive and humiliating. According to him, David had no self-worth. Instead of the blessing he expected, David received a curse (1 Sam 25:6, 10-12).²⁰

By contrast, Abigail spoke with wisdom (1 Sam 25:24-31), presenting herself to David with humility.²¹ Unlike her husband, who was contemptuous, she was praiseworthy and pleasant, disarming David with her wit and charm. Before he could unleash his avowed angry response (1 Sam 25:21-22), Abigail divested him of his anger by her *actions* and *speech*. “She *hurried* and *got down from the donkey* and *fell* before David on her face and *bowed* to the ground, and *fell* at his feet” (1 Sam 25:23-24a, emphasis supplied). Her opening words were designed to blot out David’s intentions to retaliate: “Upon me, my lord, let this iniquity be upon me. . . . Accept this blessing which your maidservant brought for my lord” (1 Sam 25:24, 25, 27; cf. 1 Sam 25:28, 30). Alice Bach notes that

throughout her speech, Abigail continues to emphasize a power hierarchy, repeatedly calling David *‘adoni* and herself *‘amateka/shiphateka*. While her actions show that she is accustomed to controlling situations, her words assure David that she is handing power over to him. . . . Her deference to the landless pauper underscores David’s position as prince in disguise.²²

Abigail does not define herself as Nabal’s wife (this is the work of the narrator); rather she dissociates herself from him. He is evil and foolish,

¹⁷McCarter, 389.

¹⁸Klein, 248.

¹⁹In describing Nabal’s verbal assault, the servant uses the verb *wy’t* (“he flew out”), thus comparing the attack to that of a bird of prey. Cf. Garsiel, 164.

²⁰The word *shālôm* is mentioned four times, emphasizing the delegation’s goodwill. Garsiel, 164-165, contends that Nabal’s answer denotes a midrashic play on names that is very insulting to David. He both denies David’s modest request and mocks his family.

²¹Gerald Hammond claims that “in contrast with the other women in David’s story, Abigail is presented comically in her encounters with him” (“Michal, Tamar, Abigail and What Bathsheba Said: Notes Towards a Really Inclusive Translation of the Bible,” in *Women in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. George J. Brooks [Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1992], 67).

²²Alice Bach, “The Pleasure of Her Text,” in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts*, ed. Alice Bach (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 27.

base, a villain. But she is not (1 Sam 25:25).

Several appeals characterize Abigail's monologue. First, she appeals to David's conscience and moral aptitude. Her counsel was for him not to shed blood, especially innocent blood: "Yahweh has restrained you from getting involved in blood guilt and from getting victory from your own hand. . . . [M]ay there not be a cause for your stumbling for having poured out blood for no reason or for my lord's hand obtaining his own victory" (1 Sam 25:26, 30-31). Thus, Abigail cautioned David to consider his future reign and the citizens of that administration, who would be motivated either by fear of reprisal or true loyalty.

Her second appeal was to David's physical need of food and drink (1 Sam 25:27).²³ Called a "blessing," this appeal echoed the one David had sent to Nabal (1 Sam 25:6, 14) and contrasts with Nabal's harsh words. When David's request for provisions from Nabal was insolently denied, he angrily and hastily vowed to revenge Nabal and all his household by killing them (1 Sam 25:13, 21-22). This impulsive action was more in harmony with the character of Saul than with that of David. His seriousness may be gauged by the oath that he vehemently made: "So and more also do God" (1 Sam 25:22). Acting wisely, Abigail gathered enough food for David and his men, rode out to meet him, and bowed to show her respect.

Her third appeal was to David's manhood. Elements such as his integrity ("no evil has been found in you"; 1 Sam 25:28b) and God's plan to exalt him to rulership (1 Sam 25:29) were invoked.²⁴ She emphatically stated that she *believed* in his divine mission to fight the battles of God and that he would be king. Her expression of certainty that God had chosen David, and not another, to be king must have appealed to his manhood. By agreeing with David that Nabal had behaved with great disrespect, she was able to stem David's anger and avert bloodshed. She also indicated that David ought to continue fighting God's battles (1 Sam 25: 28) rather than pursuing revenge for personal wrongs, even though he was ill-treated. Abigail persuaded David that judgment is a divine prerogative, which he must be careful not to usurp. In fact, God would act punitively against David's enemies—Nabal included—if David refused to assume God's responsibility of rendering judgment (1 Sam 25:29). He would, in time, be, in stark contrast to his present position, the *nagid 'al yisra'el* ("ruler over Israel"; v. 30) over a *bayit ne'eman* ("a secure dynasty").²⁵

²³There may be a pun intended in Hebrew between the word "skins" (*nible*) and "Nabal." Cf. Klein, 249.

²⁴Note her diplomacy in speaking of Saul's attempt to kill David. Instead of naming him, she states, "Yet a man pursues you" (1 Sam 25:29a).

²⁵Cf. Nathan's prophecy in 2 Sam 7:17, which uses the same language. No doubt the rabbis

Abigail concluded by pleading with David to refuse blood-guilt and to deal kindly with her when he became king. Her speech halted David's negative impulse. Thus, she acted the part of the perfect wife, who "opens her mouth to speak with wisdom; instruction in fidelity is on her tongue" (Prov 31:26). Levenson comments: "Abigail devises the perfect solution to the dilemma: she intercedes in behalf of Nabal (1 Sam 25:24), although conceding that he has no case and no hope of survival (1 Sam 25:25-26). In other words, while overtly defending him, she covertly dissociates herself from him."²⁶

As the story continues, the literary device of contrast is again employed. Nabal's gluttony after the sheep-shearing is in contrast to his denial of provision for David's starving men. He "feasted like a king, but rejected the legitimate request of the future king."²⁷ For such action, Nabal met with divine retribution. After hearing the news of what Abigail had done, he fell into shock and never recovered, dying ten days later. Ironically, his staunch refusal to give caused him to lose everything. The poignant point of 1 Sam 25:38 is that God killed him.

Contrary to Nabal, David accepted Abigail's counsel and thanked her generously (1 Sam 25:33-34). He understood that her wise dealings alone averted the foolish violence he had considered committing. "Her speech, seasoned with grace, and full of kindness and peace, shed a heavenly influence. Better impulses came to David, and he trembled as he thought of what might have been the consequences of his rash purpose."²⁸

After Nabal's death, Abigail married David²⁹ and later had a son called Kileab (2 Sam 3:3) or Daniel (1 Chron 3:1) with him. The blessing of motherhood was highly regarded in ancient Israel, so much so that childlessness was regarded as a curse (1 Sam 1). There is no record of children produced by Nabal and Abigail, but the narrator implies that Abigail was blessed in her relationship with David.

In the final analysis, it seems that Nabal and Abigail were remarkably mismatched: the shameless villain and the intelligent, beautiful wife. Nabal, who was introduced in terms of his possessions, perishes. Thus, he

regarded Abigail as one of the seven women who was endowed with the Spirit. See Levenson, 20.

²⁶Ibid., 19.

²⁷Klein, 251.

²⁸Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 667. Cf. Prov 11:22, where a beautiful woman lacking in discretion is likened to gold in a swine's snout.

²⁹It is advanced by Fewell and Gunn, 193, that Abigail's earlier expression to "wash feet" is a subtle sexual offer of herself to David. In 2 Sam 11:8, David urged Uriah to go to his house to engage in sexual intercourse with Bathsheba, his wife. He says euphemistically "wash your feet." Further, the root *rgl* ("foot") is used as a euphemism for genitals in Ruth 3:4, 7; 2 Kgs 18:27 (Qere); Isa 7:20.

exits the story as all unwanted perishables do—he perishes. Abigail, who was introduced in terms of a lovely character and person, leaves the story with those qualities still intact, and with much more—a new marriage, a new life, and a child, the evidence of God’s blessing.

The Intertextuality of the Story

King Saul’s story is similar to both Nabal and David: he is foolish and impetuous. For example, he foolishly offered a burnt offering before the ill-fated battle with the Philistines (1 Sam 13:9-10). Further, he failed to carry out the divine mandate to destroy Agag king of the Amalekites and all of the Amalekites’ livestock (1 Sam 15:13-23). His revengeful attitude against David began because the women of Israel were chanting in favor of David more than for him (1 Sam 18:6-8).

Saul was great, but he was driven by folly. He was powerful, but unwise. Nabal was also rich and great, but not wise. He was driven by folly. Both ended ignominiously. Thus, the narratives associate evil and folly. David too, acting under revenge, almost did something regretful. If Abigail had not interceded, he would have committed a foolish act. It was her wisdom that protected him.

The Abigail story is placed between 1 Sam 24 and 26 to emphasize that wisdom is more powerful than greatness and riches, and is more to be desired. Abigail was not powerful, but she was wise. Not only did her wisdom save numerous lives and avert David’s malfeasance; it also caught his affection, so that he provided her with his love and protection.

This story, contrary to the opinion of some writers, is one that highlights the connection between Saul’s demise and David’s rise to power. As Ralph W. Klein comments: “David’s marriage to Abigail . . . provides an important link to the Calebite clan of Judah and prepares the reader for David’s anointing in Hebron, the capital of the Calebite territory.”³⁰

Further, 1 Sam 25 is bracketed by the events of 1 Sam 24 and 26, which tell of David’s sparing of Saul’s life. In 1 Sam 24, he refused to act with vengeance and kill Saul. In 1 Sam 25, driven by revenge, he nearly did something foolish. With Abigail’s intervention, he came back to his senses by learning restraint, a quality needed for effective leadership.³¹ In 1 Sam 26, once more balanced, he refused again to kill Saul. Abigail became the balancing act between folly and evil, the quintessential epitome of wisdom.³²

³⁰Klein, 246, 247. Cf. Levenson, 25, 26.

³¹McCarter, 400-402.

³²1 Sam 25 also proleptically unveils an ominous side of David. His shedding of innocent

Summary and Conclusion

In this drama, Nabal and David represent Northrop Frye's description of the comic pair, who were operating from two poles: the *alazōn* ("the boaster or impostor") represented in the affluent but despicable Nabal and the *eirōn* ("self-deprecator") represented in the young, hot-headed David. Both were extreme and irrational in their behavior. The conduct of each could have had severe repercussions. However, between these two is the *alēthes* ("the truthful person"), played by Abigail. Nehama Aschkenasy notes that "this formula, too, seems to apply to the three actors in this small drama, with the men assuming the roles of the comic extremes . . . , while the woman represents the golden mean between these two antithetical forms of comic conduct."³³

Thus, Abigail is the moderating force, who "averts the clash of two extremes; and at the same time, she is also the wise teacher, who instructs and directs the man, and whose advice is taken."³⁴ The outstanding quality that Abigail exhibited was wisdom. Compared to Nabal, whose name "Fool" defined his character, she was wise and upright. Compared to David, who acted impetuously and was full of vengeful anger, she was composed, settled, and free of agitation. Unlike the host of unnamed women in Scripture,³⁵ Abigail was not a mere adjunct to her husband, understood only in the context of men's activities. As a wise and beautiful woman, she was the perfect foil for the harsh and foolish Nabal, who paralleled the foolish king Saul. Both died. Folly was extinguished; wisdom exalted. Abigail shone, while David and Nabal, both of whom acted rashly, receded to the background.³⁶ Abigail was the wise woman in a male-dominated, foolish world.

blood is his demise, as unmasked in his shameless murder of Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 11:1-12:25).

³³Aschkenasy, 175.

³⁴Ibid., 176.

³⁵Bird, 41.

³⁶Although she "helped in educating the young David and then managed to share in his faith by marrying him, Abigail now slips back to her feminine destiny of anonymity and marginal existence, and the biblical text, that has shifted momentarily from its main course, goes back to narrating the adventure of its central hero, David" (Aschkenasy, 177). In all subsequent passages, she is called Nabal's widow (27:3; 30:5; 2 Sam 2:2). Fewell and Gunn, 156, contend that "David's policy is to dissipate all power but his own. He will not have one wife but several. And no wife will be first in his house. He will keep his political options open and Abigail, whose options are now closing, will have to learn to live in their shadow."