

The Wise Women in the Books of Samuel

– a critical and theological analysis of 1Sam 25 and 2Sam 14 –

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ABSTRACT

The intention of this work is to investigate the role of two women characters in the Books of Samuel, called wise women, to see how they influenced the life of Israel and its king. Understanding their life and character will contribute to the interpretation of the Books of Samuel: we will find out how these women affected the course of the history of Israel, the political acceptance of David as king, and the morality of the time.

KEY WORDS Kingship, parable, providence, women, covenant.

INTRODUCTION

From a biblical theological point of view the key aspect of the books of Samuel is how the earlier promises given to the patriarchs and to Israel are partially fulfilled in the reign of David. The reign of David is a turning point in the outworking of God's purposes of salvation. The narratives about David and about the major women characters in the Books of Samuel show that if the promise has a future, it is more a matter of God's grace than of human faithfulness. In the outworking of this grace and fulfilment of the promises, women characters in the Books of Samuel have a major contribution. The women characters in the Books of Samuel shaped the whole history of Israel in that time, influencing familial, social and political affairs, changing and determining the course of events. They deserve a higher consideration and a deeper appreciation.

Biblical narratives generally are products of their time, and by nature are historiography, or at least semi-historical writings, of theological, ethical, social and national character, (giving to their writings a literary and aesthetic shaping, and using rhetorical devices). Abigail (1Sam 25:24-31) and the Tekoite woman (2Sam 14:4-17) make use of lengthy speeches, which should be studied in their literary, persuasive, ethical, judicial and political aspects. They both make a confession of guilt; and both intercede for a guilty party (Nabal and the fratricide son), trying to get mercy from David. Their speeches are very persuasive, and at the end these women are able to convince David to do what they want. We are

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going to examine these two women characters and their convincing speeches. They both relate to David as to the Anointed of the Lord, and they mention the Lord's name several times in their speeches.

ABIGAIL

The story of Abigail (1Sam 25) is placed after David had been anointed as king by Samuel (1Sam 16:1-3), so from the narrator's point of view he is already a "king-in-waiting."² This is important, because it influences the understanding of Nabal's and Abigail's treatment of David: they are dealing with the anointed of the Lord.

Abigail reminds David of God's promises, and her speech based on the general promises of the Lord becomes equivalent with a prophesy. She considers the meeting with David the providence of God, and urges him respectfully, to not take vengeance upon his foolish enemy, Nabal, but let God do this work, because it belongs to Him.

Abigail and Nabal

Abigail's characterization is presented in contrast with her husband, Nabal, who is presented as worthy of his name³, a vicious, materialistic, egocentric, "worthless fellow" (1Sam 25:25). Because of this deliberate, overt characterization of the narrator, we know from the start, who Nabal is: a Calebite, a dog-like man,⁴ הָאִישׁ קָשָׁה "a harsh man" and רַע מַעֲלָלִים "evil in his doings" (1Sam 25:3), הַבְּלִיעֵל "a good for nothing" "a man of Belial" (1Sam 25:25), who is indulging himself in lavish banquet in which he becomes so drunk that he is unapproachable till the next morning (1Sam 25:36-37). He is introduced in terms of his possessions⁵ and his autocratic arrogance over his servants. The sharp contrasts between Nabal and Abigail are open hints, that they

² George G. Nicol, "David, Abigail and Bathsheba, Nabal and Uriah: Transformations within a Triangle," *Scandinavian Journal for the Old Testament*, no. 12/1 (1998): 131.

³ Levenson considers that his real name was changed for purposes of characterization. See: Levenson, Jon D. *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly no. 40 (1978): 14.

⁴ The word *kālibbî* in the *qērê* appears to mean either "Calebite" or "dog-like" (cf. LXX, anthropos kunikos).

⁵ Brueggemann observes that „The way of introducing Nabal is precisely on target, because Nabal's possessions precede his own person. His life is determined by his property. Nabal lives to defend his property, and he dies in an orgy, enjoying his property. Only after being told of his riches are we told his name (v. 3a)” Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY.: John Knox Press 1990), 175.

“are irremediably mismatched.”⁶ Abigail is טובת־שִׂכּוּל “of good understanding” and יִפְתַּח תֵּאָר “beautiful in appearance.” Her “good understanding” is evidenced by her activity in the narrative and highlights her function as a wisdom figure. Her wisdom is revealed especially in her skillful use of words in her pathetic and convincing speech to David.

Abigail’s actions are sharply contrasted with Nabal’s actions. While Nabal’s non-diplomatic reply to David was an insult, Abigail’s speech is a remedy of the abuse. Nabal is a fool – churlish, surly and mean – who provoked David’s anger, but Abigail uses her wisdom and rhetoric, and softens David’s heart. Nabal is a “spiritual, moral and social disaster.”⁷ We do not need to consider this an exaggeration: Nabal’s servants (1Sam 25:17), his enemy (v. 21), and his wife (v. 25) all agree in this matter; and Nabal’s own words (vv. 10-11) vindicate the writer’s assessment. The contrast is greater when his wife is described in the same breath as having טובת־שִׂכּוּל ויִפְתַּח תֵּאָר “good sense and beautiful appearance” (v. 3b).

Before examining Abigail’s speech, we need to focus upon Nabal’s insult. It has three parts: 1) a double rhetorical question which derides David by suggesting that he is rootless and his family is unknown (1Sam 25:10a); 2) a declarative statement which regards David as a rebel, a run-away slave (1Sam 25:10b); 3) a further rhetorical question which suggests the foolishness of giving provisions intended for Nabal’s servants to persons from places unknown (1Sam 25:11b). All these questions touched David’s pride and excited his anger. He was ready to go to take vengeance upon Nabal, by showing him, who he really is. David’s wrath was not right before God, because it was a sudden burst of a sinful passion, and not becoming to a servant of God.

The remedy for this insult is Abigail’s argument, which is a rhetorical masterpiece. Generally, in her speech Abigail “moves from vengeance to promise, from Nabal (v. 25) to David’s secure house (v. 28), from the momentary to the eternal.”⁸ She disarms David by taking full blame for Nabal’s irresponsibility, interceding in behalf of her husband. She assures David that the vengeance of the Lord will visit Nabal if David will restrain himself from usurping the divine prerogative. She offers the goods she brought as a token of her confidence in the rightness of David’s cause. In her wisdom Abigail does three things: 1). as mediator between David and her husband, she takes upon herself Nabal’s guilt (1Sam 25:24); 2). she makes excuses for her husband’s bad

⁶ Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 16.

⁷ Ralph Dale Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the heart*, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 114.

⁸ Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 20.

behaviour (1Sam 25:25); 3). she responds to David's challenge by preparing (v. 18) and by presenting (1Sam 15:27) gifts to him, acting on behalf of Nabal (but of course without his permission), doing what Nabal refused to do.

The prophetic element in Abigail's speech

In her prophetic speech (1Sam 25:26-31), Abigail makes frequent references to the Lord. She mentions the Lord's name in the introductory oath formula, *יְיָ-יְהוָה* "as the Lord lives" (1Sam 25:26). The Lord is the one who restrained David from his evil purpose and vengeance (v. 26) and the one who will make a lasting house for David (v. 28), because he is fighting the Lord's battles (v. 29). David is going to be preserved from his enemies because of the Lord his God (v. 29), and the Lord will bring his promises into fulfilment concerning David (v. 29-30). These references to the Lord not only sharpens the contrast with her husband's godlessness, but gives a prophetic reference to what is going to happen with David: this is an anticipation of what God is going to promise David in His covenant (2Sam 7).

Abigail's speech is not only exposing her wisdom but also her prophetic insight. Abigail recognizes David's coming kingship, she says that David will be chosen "ruler over all Israel" (v. 30), and in speaking about building for him *בֵּית נֶאֱמָן* "a secure dynasty" (v. 28) by the Lord, anticipates the dynastic element of Nathan's prophecy in 2Sam 7:8. 16, where the same language is used. In this way, the idea of the eternal, hereditary dynasty appears first in the speech of Abigail. This language becomes "a typical phraseology in Israelite-Judean historiography."

David is assured by Abigail that he would indeed become king of Israel, but he has to come to the throne with a clear conscience: There is no need to take the vengeance into his own hands: God is going to do that, not David. The Lord is in control, and David is going to have a glorious future.

Abigail's moral superiority and marriage with David

In a way David is also in contrast in the narrative: first, with himself. This is a different David than what we find in the previous episodes. In chapters 24 and 26, David considers it a sin to lift his hand against Saul and shed his blood; here only Abigail's rhetorical genius saves David from bloodying his hands. Levenson looks at David's activity with a cynical eye, in general saying that: 1). David's request of Nabal was nothing more than simple extortion; 2). the entire conflict with Nabal and subsequent marriage to Abigail were politically motivated; and 3). David's illegitimate response to Nabal revealed the evil nature

of his character.⁹ Abigail is better than David. David is reacting differently than how we have perceived his character until now.¹⁰

Abigail and Nabal are also in sharp contrast with Bathsheba and Uriah. The story of Abigail precedes the story of David and Bathsheba chronologically, and Berlin considers “a mirror image” of it.¹¹ Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah was a good man, Nabal was a fool. Bathsheba could do nothing to save her husband, but Abigail does this, though Nabal did not deserve it. The relationship between Nabal and Abigail is one of disrespect, alienation and hostility, while David here appears to be respectful to social norms, open to reason, capable of self-restraint, and blameless.¹² It is just the opposite, what we find out about him in the story of Bathsheba and Uriah. In the story of Abigail David’s apparent reserve marks him out as a character that is altogether more noble than the David who takes Bathsheba and then kills her husband. In the story of Bathsheba David commits murder because of a woman, while here by a woman David is prevented committing murder. There David is stirred up by a woman; here David is stilled down also by a woman. Both women later become his wives. Miscall summarises this: “In both stories, David gains a wife, but the process by which he gets them could not differ more radically.”¹³

Levenson considers David’s marriage to Abigail as a pivotal move in his ascent to kingship at Hebron: “There is no (other) explanation of how a non-Calebite like David managed to assume kingship in the capital of the Calebite patrimony, Hebron.”¹⁴ After the reference of David’s move to Hebron (2Sam 2:1-4a) the passage goes on without any break to note David’s wives, where Abigail is described as אִשְׁתּוֹ נָבָל הַכַּרְמֶלִי “the wife of Nabal the Carmelite.” So, David is the successor to Nabal the Calebite and the husband of a prominent Calebite woman, who bears a son called Chileab, reflecting probably Abigail’s Calebite origins (2Sam 3:3). This may be true, since in the early history of Israel there are several

⁹ Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 20.

¹⁰ In the preceding and following chapter the narrator is at great pains to show that, despite the opportunities given, David did not take the law into his own hands. We may note also that David’s reaction to Nabal’s insult is the opposite of his reaction to Shimei’s even more direct insults (2Sam 16:5-14). The reason for this may be that in 1Sam 25 David needs to be helped by Abigail to learn that kingship is going to be secured for him by God, while in 2Sam 16 he already learned this lesson.

¹¹ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 30.

¹² There is an impression that David and Abigail are strongly attracted to each other and yet “fully understand the propriety that demands that their attraction should not escalate into a fully consummated relationship,” George G. Nicol, *David, Abigail and Bathsheba, Nabal and Uriah: Transformations within a Triangle*, 136.

¹³ Peter Miscall, “Literary Unity in Old Testament Narrative,” *Semeia* 15 (1979): 39.

¹⁴ Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 25.

examples about political marriages, which could bestow legitimacy on an aspirant to the throne. Close examples for this are the narratives about Absalom, Adonijah and Abner.¹⁵

This could explain also why David married Michal, the daughter of Saul, and even Ahinoam, the wife of Saul. Ahinoam the Jezreelite is mentioned with Abigail in the account of David's procession into Hebron (2Sam 2:2). While we know Abigail's general background, we do not have a clear account about the past of Ahinoam. What we know is, that only one person bears her name: אַחִימָעֵץ בַּת שָׂאֻל אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲחִינוֹעַם "the name of Saul's wife, Ahinoam, the daughter of Ahimaaz" (1Sam 14:50). It may well be that when David came into Hebron, he had as wives on one side a wealthy Calebite, Abigail, and at the other side the former wife of Saul, Ahinoam. Even if we do not know the time when David married Saul's former wife, it most probably happened, because Nathan clearly points this out in his rebuke as a well-known thing. The text reads: אֲדֹנָיִךָ בְּחִיקְךָ וְאֶת־בֵּית אֲדֹנָיִךָ וְאֶת־נְשֵׂי אֲדֹנָיִךָ לְךָ אֶת־בֵּית אֲדֹנָיִךָ וְאֶת־נְשֵׂי אֲדֹנָיִךָ "I gave you the household of your lord and the wives of your lord in your bosom." (2Sam 12:8).

Ahinoam is always mentioned before Abigail (1Sam 27:3. 30:5. 2Sam 2:2. 1Sam 3:2. 1Chron 3:1) and bears David a son before Abigail does (2Sam 3:2. 1Chron 3:1). So, Ahinoam could marry David before the conflict with the house of Nabal started. If this is so, then David could have laid claim to Saul's throne even while Saul was still alive.¹⁶ Abigail, together with Nabal, her husband must have been very powerful figures in the Calebite clan, being at the pinnacle of the social status, as shown by the description of his wealth: three thousand sheep and one thousand goats. This is why he was holding מִשְׁתֶּה כְּמִשְׁתֶּה הַמֶּלֶךְ "a banquet like that of a king" (1Sam 25:36). Levenson considers that "David picked a quarrel with Nabal with precisely such a marriage in mind",¹⁷ which is an exaggeration of the matter, because the reasons we find in text are different. What we know for sure, is that through this marriage he got by chance a very powerful status which could contribute to his kingship in Hebron.

¹⁵ The first two examples are in David's family: Absalom on Ahitophel's advice has intercourse with David's concubines as part of his effort to capture the throne for himself (2Sam 16:20-23) and Adonijah asks for the hand of Abishag, David's last mistress (1Kings 2:13-25), to which Solomon replies, "You might as well ask for the kingdom!" The third example is in Saul's house: Abner's assumption of Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines makes Ishbaal suspect Abner's loyalty to the house of Saul (2Sam 3:6-10).

¹⁶ As convincing evidence for all these Levenson considers the account of David's reign in Hebron: "The chronology of 2Sam 2:10-11 corroborates this nicely, since it attributes a reign of two years to Saul's son and successor Ishbaal and one of seven and one half to David at Hebron. This suggests that David may have been King of Judah for five and a half years while Saul ruled the rest of the tribes." Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 27.

¹⁷ Jon D. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as literature and as history*, 27.

THE TEKOITE WOMAN

In the story of the Tekoite wise woman (2Sam 14:4-20) the אִשָּׁה הַתְּכוֹמָה was instructed by Joab to go to David as a woman who had been “mourning a long time for the dead.” Joab put “in her mouth” the words of a tale (2Sam 14:2-3), according to which she is presumably a mother with two sons, one of whom killed the other in anger on the field. Her family now demands in revenge the death of the murderer, but in reality they hope to eliminate the sole heir of the family. Hearing this, David promises to give orders concerning the widow. But the wise woman continues her speech, until she receives immunity from any persecution. Then, she goes on again, until David swears by the Lord, saying: “not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground” (2Sam 14:11). At this point the woman changes her tune, and accuses David of “planning against the people of God” (2Sam 14:13), then pleading for Absalom’s restoration. She quotes a proverb: “For we will surely die, and become like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again” (2Sam 14:14), then she applies the king’s decision to her own situation and convinces him. Absalom’s banishment is ended, but he could not see the king’s face; in other words, he remains in another exile, in Jerusalem.

The story told by the woman, as we will see, does not represent a real event. It was only a ruse used by Joab to manipulate David to permit the return of his murderer son from exile. But the story was presented plausibly enough for the king to believe. The listener or reader at the beginning cannot find any sign to cause him/her to suspect that the story is not a real one. Everything is so vital, so realistic! The story saturated with emotions and moves dramatically to its climax, reaching its goal. David realizes that Joab is behind this, that the most important question is not the situation of the woman’s son (that is only an introduction), but Absalom’s fratricide and his restoration.

Literary considerations

The pattern of this episode (2Sam 14:1-22) may be presented like this:

Joab’s plan, vv. 1-3

Woman’s distress caused by her family, vv. 4-7

The king resolves the case, vv. 8-11

Israel’s distress caused by the king, vv. 12-14

The woman softens the accusation, vv. 15-17

Joab discovered, vv. 18-20

King’s decision, vv. 21-22¹⁸

¹⁸ The pattern is partly borrowed from: Ralph Dale Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of every adversity*, Christian Focus Publications (Fearn: Geanies House, 1999), 145.

It is clear that the main part of the passage is made up of the woman's conversation with the king. Joab may be there, in the background; but this *'iššâ ḥākāmâ* had her own special ability in handling the words. She speaks the right words at the right time, redirecting the course of events. She summarized her distress caused by her family and mentions the fact that their passion for justice is only a cover for their greed: they want *לְאַתְחִילֵהוּ שָׁמַיִם* "to destroy the heir also" (2Sam 14:7). If the remaining son will be executed, not only will she remain without support, but also with no descendant and the property will become available to the extended family. In other words, she is saying that in the name of justice they plan injustice. Among the heavily stressed extenuating facts the worst thing which could happen is to remain without posterity, often mentioned in curses. Hoftijzer points out, that "the clan, who in this case asks for justice does not do so for justice's sake. They are greedy: their aim is the inheritance not justice (v. 7).¹⁹

David decides to protect the heir. Asking permission to continue, the woman turns this decision into an accusation that the king is being two-faced: he decided that the woman's banished son should be restored, but he does nothing to restore his own banished son.

With her parallel case she assumes that Absalom is the (next) heir to the throne and by depriving Israel of the heir, David acts "against the people of God" (2Sam 14:13). For a while she philosophises that mortality is unavoidable and God wants to preserve and restore life, but immediately after that she reverts again to her own situation (2Sam 14:15-17), explaining her reason for applying to the king.

Her long speech is puzzling: it seems useless to use so many words after reaching the main point. But there is no reason to consider her a highly talkative woman: an *'iššâ ḥākāmâ* knows how to present her case and how to act in a given situation. She does this with a very specific reason: to delude David that the main point is not her real main point! As Hertzberg rightly notes:

First, the woman means to give the impression that her own personal problem is the reason for her appearance, and the case of the exiled king's son is mentioned only incidentally, as a related instance. By the construction of her address she means to make what is, of course, her main concern, the case of Absalom, seem to be a subsidiary matter.²⁰

¹⁹ Jacob Hoftijzer, "David and the Tekoite Woman," *Vetus Testamentum* no. 20 (1970): 421-422.

²⁰ Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1964), 332-333.

But David is also wise (2Sam 14:20), as the Tekoite woman has noticed. He will not confuse main points with sub-points, and so asks the woman if Joab's hand is not involved in all this. With another exposé using 43 words, the woman's answer is: Yes. Even so, David ends Absalom's banishment (2Sam 14:21).²¹

Textual considerations

The expression in 2Sam 14:3, that Joab *וַיִּשֶׂם יוֹאָב אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיהָ* “put the words in her mouth” is found also in Exod 4:15, Num 22:38 and Ezra 8:17, and means always an instruction given by a superior to a subordinate, who has to carry out the received instructions. The question of David in 2Sam 14:19, *וַיֹּאב אֶתְךָ בְּכָל־זוֹאת הַדָּבָר*, refers exactly to this, i.e. if the woman acts completely on Joab's instructions. The woman's answer is affirmative. This means that Joab instructed her about the matter in general, but could not instruct her about all the details of the discussion. The telling of the story in a skillful way like this, is still the property of the *אִשָּׁה הַחֲכָמָה*, since Joab could not anticipate the king's possible reaction. Joab had the initiative in this endeavour, but the wise woman of Tekoa executed his commands, with her very special ability. Joab took the decision to intercede for Absalom, but the wise woman carried out his wish.

The meaning of the verb *kālāh* in *וַתִּכְלֵל הוּד הַמִּלְכָּה* is stronger than ‘to long’ or ‘yearn’ or “desire”, as most of the English translations understands.²² It is better to follow the Septuagint in this case: *καὶ ἐκόπασεν τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ ἐξελεθεῖν ὀπίσω Αβεσσαλωμ* “and the spirit of king David ceased to go out after Absalom”, or the Vulgate: “cessavitque David rex persecui Absalom”, “king David ceased to persecute Absalom.”²³ The translation of McCarter, or Keil and Delitzsch, who gave to this verb a hostile sense in 2Sam 13:39, is correct: “the king's enthusiasm for marching out against (Absalom) was spent”, or “and it (this) held king David back from going out to Absalom.”²⁴ In 2Sam 14:1 there is no verb ‘long/long for’, and the verse simply means, that Joab knew

²¹ Bellefontaine believes, “there is no clear evidence that the paramount is legally bound in parallel cases by the verdict he pronounces in a previous case”. However, the general feeling after the Tekoite woman's rhetoric is that she convinced David. Through a normal understanding of the narrative the reader comes to believe that Absalom's return to Jerusalem was achieved by the wisdom of the Tekoite woman. See Elizabeth Bellefontaine, “Customary Law and Citizenship: Judicial Aspects of 2Samuel 14:4-21,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no. 38 (1987): 62.

²² This is how the Geneva Bible 1599, the King James Version 1611/1769, the New King James Version 1982, the American Standard Version 1901, the Revised Standard Version 1952, the New American Standard Bible 1977, the New International Version 1984, the English Standard Version 2001, and The Webster Bible 1833 translates it.

²³ This is how The New Jerusalem Bible and New Living Translation translates it.

²⁴ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *2 Samuel*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 344.

(perceived)²⁵ that the heart of the king was either ‘upon Absalom’ (i.e., he was thinking about him) or ‘against Absalom’ (he remained hostile to him)²⁶. If David had been yearning for Absalom, the whole strategy of Joab would become unnecessary; but if he is ‘against’ Absalom then the manipulating manoeuvre is understandable. 2Sam 14:24 clearly shows that David was not to welcome Absalom back with open arms. His grief because of Amnon’s death gradually diminished in time, but this has as a result only that he did not punish Absalom for his wickedness. He remained content with keeping Absalom in banishment. This is why Joab made use of the Tekoite wise woman, סִבָּב אֶת־פְּנֵי הַדָּבָר, to try “to change the present situation” (2Sam 14:20).

The verb *ḥāšab* in 2Sam 14:13 means ‘to think, to reckon’,²⁷ but may have the meaning ‘to plan, to devise’, and in some cases it clearly bears a meaning close to ‘to realize, to do’. Thus the expression וְלָמָּה הִשְׁבַּחְתָּה כִּזְאֵת may be translated as “why have you (schemed and) done something like this”,²⁸ bearing the accusation that David devised and did evil against God’s people. The woman goes on and reproaches the king that he violates his own ruling by not letting Absalom return and that his people have to pay for it.

Hoftijzer suggests a free translation of the second half of v. 14: “Will not God dedicate Himself to seeing that a banished one does not remain exiled from Him (i.e. He most certainly will dedicate Himself) and will He not find ways to do so?”²⁹ He takes this sentence as a rhetorical question, and the negation as negating both verbal forms, which is a normal understanding of the sentence. The Tekoite woman with the expression וְחָשַׁב מִחֲשֻׁבוֹת לְבַלְתִּי יְהוָה מִמֶּנּוּ נָדָה (“but He devises means, so that His banished ones are not expelled from Him”) suggests that David is not in harmony with God, because he keeps the banished one to remain an outcast.

Hermeneutical considerations

The interpretation of the words of the woman is not always easy, we see this especially in v. 9: עָלַי אֲדֹנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ הָעֹנֵן וְעַל־בֵּית אָבִי וְהַמֶּלֶךְ וְכִסְאוֹ נָקִי: “o my lord, the

²⁵ The interpretation of the verb *yd'* (*know*, with added idea of *perceive*, *be aware*, *taking note*) in 2Sam 14:1 is explained by Francis Brown, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, with the cooperation of S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson, 1979), 293.

²⁶ This later translation is more likely, in the light of Dan 11:28. See also: C. E. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Vol. III. *I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 405-406.

²⁷ Francis Brown, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 363.

²⁸ See: Jer 18:11, 26:3, Ezek 38:10, Ps 35:20, and especially Gen 50:20, where Joseph’s brothers devised and did evil against him, but God devised and did help him out of his difficulties.

²⁹ Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 437.

king, the iniquity is on me and my father's house, but the king and his throne are guiltless.” This means that the woman and her family will bear all the consequences and the royal house will not have to face them, if the king is going to make a decision deviating from the established norm. But it seems that these words are not related only with the question of the consequences, but were meant to induce David after he had made a vague decision, to make a more specific one, and had this result. The woman received the king’s decision strengthened by an oath.

The only partial parallel we have in the OT is in 1Sam 25:24, where Abigail says to David that בִּי־אֲנִי אֲדֹנָי הַטֶּוֹן “upon me, my lord, is the iniquity.” In this parallel case the usual interpretation has no meaning, that Abigail is ready to bear the consequences, if David will abandon the normal procedure. Even if she speaks about her sin, which must be forgiven (1Sam 25:28), on the other hand she incriminated Nabal and exculpates herself (1Sam 25:25-26). A solution is given by Gevarjahu quoted by Hoftijzer, that “the formula was a polite way of expressing that David and ‘his throne’ would be responsible, namely for the blood of the last son left to the widow, should be killed as retribution for his crime”³⁰. This fits both 2Sam 14:9 and 1Sam 25:24, but if we look at the other cases³¹ where people express their feelings of guilt, they are not at all a polite way of saying that the other party is free from guilt. Rather, they are a sincere confession of guilt and acceptance of the responsibility, and in many other cases is followed by a plea for not to be punished.³² Therefore, the confession of guilt may be viewed as part of a plea for forgiveness, where the forgiveness is the main aim. Hoftijzer correctly expresses this:

In both cases (i.e. 1Sam 25:24 and 2Sam 14:9), Abigail and the Tekoite woman make a confession of guilt. They both intercede for a guilty party (Nabal and the fratricide son) and try to get mercy. ... The confession in the first place is meant to support the plea. If this is so, the central point of these texts is not who takes (or has to take) the responsibility in the case under consideration. But uttering the formula in question both women throw themselves on the mercy of

³⁰ Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 425.

³¹ Note the confession of guilt expressed by one person to another: by David to Nathan (2Sam 12:13), by Shimei to David (2Sam 19:21), by Hezekiah to the king of Assyria (2Kings 18:14), by Aron to Moses (Num 12:11); and the confession of guilt expressed by people to God: David’s confession after the census (2Sam 24:10), the people’s confession of their idolatry (Judg 10:10-15), the people’s another similar confession (Judg 12:10), and a similar one made by the exiles (1Kings 8:47, 2Chron 6:37). For more on this subject see: Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 425.

³² See the long list of these cases in Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 426.

David: they hope by doing so to further the chance that their request will be granted.³³

Judicial considerations

The narrative about the Tekoite woman has a judicial character.³⁴ This woman told her story in such a way that David considering the circumstances could make an authoritative decision against the established norm of his time.

Gunn denies the legal nature of the story, arguing that “the legal element is merely an accident of these particular cases where the one to whom the parable is addressed happens to be a king with (implicit) judicial powers.”³⁵ However, we have to be aware of the fact that the judicial element may be there, even if by accident. The king before whom the pretended widow of Tekoa appears is functioning as the highest level of power, in social, political or even religious matters, “who has the authority to suspend the normal operation of deeply rooted customary law, and decide in favour of the petitioner.”³⁶ The woman confronts David with the fact that God as guarantor for the king’s ruling, because of the oath sworn by the king, will let whomsoever banished from Israel to return, i.e. also Absalom. If the king acts against his own ruling, “punishment will follow and still will be of no avail, God will give effect of his ruling.”³⁷

More light is thrown on the whole passage if we consider the comparisons used in the narrative. Firstly, the case presented by the woman is comparable with Absalom’s situation. The woman had two sons (as David had Absalom and Amnon). One killed the other (as Absalom killed Amnon). That the surviving son’s security is in danger, if the king will not intervene (Absalom is in danger). He must be saved, because he is the only heir (Absalom is the heir). It seems – even if there are not enough details to determine with absolute certainty – that the woman’s sons’ fight was not so serious, because there was no intention to kill each other. But a blow proved to be fatal, and this mutual hostility had a very sad result: one of the brothers died. This situation falls under the category of manslaughter, which is regulated in Num 35:6-34, Deut 19:1-13 and Josh 20.

³³ Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 427. He also argues, that בִּי-אֲנִי אֲדֹנָי (‘upon me, my Lord’) is a formula used in both 1Sam 25:24 and 2Sam 14:9 not as an expression of the willingness of the confessor to take the full consequences of the evil deeds but to throw herself at the mercy of the other party and so to avoid punishment.

³⁴ The story of the Tekoite woman has been called a “judicial parable”, or a “judgment-eliciting parable”. See the lengthy discussion about this in: Elizabeth Bellefontaine, *Customary law and citizenship: Judicial aspects of 2Samuel 14:4-21*, 47-72.

³⁵ David M. Gunn, *David and the gift of the kingdom*, 41.

³⁶ Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 438.

³⁷ Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 438.

But Absalom's fratricide was a calculated, organised, well prepared act, as a result of a long lasting, carefully nurtured hatred: "Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar" (2Sam 13:22). The commandment to the servants to strike Amnon (2Sam 13:28) betrays his murderous intentions. This is crying for justice, not for mercy. There is not enough basis to say that "the decision of the king in a special juridical case was also binding for parallel cases",³⁸ because there is no parallelism between the pretended son of the Tekoite woman and Absalom. Absalom's situation is different from what the woman presents to the king, and deciding in favour of the woman's son is not a precedent for Absalom's case. Permitting Absalom to return has nothing to do with justice.

Secondly, David is compared with an angel of the Lord, because he has the wisdom of an angel (v. 20). In 1Sam 29:9 Achish says to David that he likes him as much as he does an angel of the Lord, and in 2Sam 19:28 Mephibosheth sees David as an angel of the Lord, who may do as he pleases. In all these cases the common feature is that these people want to flatter David for one reason or another. The saying of the woman of Tekoa in this understanding is meant to be only flattery. Against this view is the opinion of Mowinckel, who referring to this text says: "through his anointing and endowment with the divine spirit the king also receives superhuman wisdom... he discerns all things and accomplishes what he wills."³⁹ The total knowledge of David is expressed with putting two opposites together: "knowing good and evil." With this the woman tells David why she expected to have her request granted: it is because the king is so extremely wise and merciful.

Blaikie compares the woman's speech with the juridical parable of Nathan about David's sin (2Sam 12:1-4), and the juridical parable of an unknown prophet about the escape of Benhadad (1Kings 20:38-43).⁴⁰ Although both Nathan and the wise Tekoite woman tried to convince David with their juridical parables, there are significant differences, as Blaikie pointed out:

There was a world-wide difference between the purpose of the parable of Nathan and that of the wise woman of Tekoah. Nathan's parable was designed to rouse the king's conscience as against his feelings, the woman of Tekoah's, as prompted by Joab, to rouse his feelings against his conscience.⁴¹

³⁸ Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 421.

³⁹ S. Mowinckel, *He that Cometh*, Oxford, 1956, 66.

⁴⁰ W. G. Blaikie, *The Second Book of Samuel*, The Expositor's Bible (Cincinnati, OH: Jennings & Graham), 208.

⁴¹ Blaikie, *The Second Book of Samuel*, 208.

The differences, compared with the Tekoite woman's parable and its presentation, are also remarkable. The woman of Tekoa prostrated herself before David, which neither of the prophets did. She asks permission to proceed. Neither of the prophets do this; but they confront the king without any introduction, presenting the consequences without any restraint. The woman speaks highly about David, but none of the prophets do so. The background of these is that "the prophet has a status that a normal person does not have and therefore he can permit himself to say things other people cannot."⁴²

At first it seems that David is not able to distinguish between a true and fictitious story, but this is not so. The author is more concerned to show the wisdom of the Tekoite woman: her wisdom is so genuine and worthy of praise, that makes David compassionate of her presented situation.⁴³

According to Simon, the ruling of David could not be considered a binding precedent for Absalom's case, because the case presented by the woman "contained numerous extenuating circumstances."⁴⁴ The question is, how we view these extenuating circumstances: do they change the basic character of the case, or are they only additions, which do not change anything? Hoftijzer's opinion is preferable here. He notes that "the two cases are considered to be parallels notwithstanding the extenuating circumstances."⁴⁵ He also explains, that for juridical cases being parallels, they only "needed to be so in the basic facts"⁴⁶, making a difference between basic facts and circumstantial facts. It may be that Joab's intention was to bring a gradual change in David's attitude, as Simon believes,⁴⁷ but after the interview with the woman the change was an immediate one. This change seems to be a result of his previous decision in the fictitious case presented by the woman.

The Tekoite woman confronts David with the consequences of his decision. With this she reveals that the presented case is not a real one, but was a kind of

⁴² Jacob Hoftijzer, *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 443.

⁴³ This is against the view of Whybray who considers this "a story of Joab's wisdom rather than that of the woman". See: R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative. A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2*, Studies in biblical Theology, Second Series 9 (London: 1968), 36ff. The narrator presents the woman as wise, not Joab. The woman of Tekoa was able to handle a very tricky case, a real test for her wisdom, even if she was instructed. Not the wisdom of the woman but the wisdom of Joab, who designed the whole strategy should be questioned, because it is a foolish thing to appeal to God's mercy (2Sam 14:14) in a case that requires his justice. He should have known that there should be no mercy if there is no penitence.

⁴⁴ Uriel Simon, *Poor man's ewe-lamb*, 224.

⁴⁵ Jacob Hoftijzer. *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 423.

⁴⁶ Hoftijzer. *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 423.

⁴⁷ Uriel Simon, *Poor man's ewe-lamb*, 225.

legal trap. In other words, “she drops her mask.”⁴⁸ She confronts David with the fact that his decision in the case of her fratricide son is a binding precedent for the case of Absalom. She does this by saying that because of this decision David himself is now guilty: If he prolongs Absalom’s exile then he violates his decision, strengthened by an oath. More than that, she reproaches David that he “acts against the people of God”: By letting Absalom stay in exile the king takes from the people their presumptive heir and makes Israel like a widow when David dies. This may be an allusion to the woman’s situation, who is a widow having her son as the only heir. Human beings are mortal – says the woman – and if David waits too long to reconcile himself with the exiled son, it may be too late. In this way, David is acting against the people of God (2Sam 14:13). The wise Tekoite woman confronts David with the fact that his decision in the woman’s case makes him guilty, and now the people have to pay heavily for his guilt.

Social considerations

The “customary law”, according to Bellefontaine⁴⁹ functioned at different levels of social segments, before the monarchy: at lower levels of households and clans, but not very often at the level of the tribe. After the establishment of a centralized political system, in the transition period of David’s time, moving from tribal to monarchical Israel, there was a continual need to consolidate the king’s office. The Tekoite wise woman obtained the decision for Absalom’s return in such a way that the king’s office as supreme judicial authority was strengthened. The former king, Saul, relied only on his military status and achievements, but David was operating as judge, who “administered judgment and justice to all his people” (2Sam 8:15). David is confronted with the request to suspend the normal operation of the law, and to interfere in local judicial activity, overturning a legitimately reached judgment of the clan. With this he risked to alienate a group which was part of his power base, and this deterred him from making a clear and forceful decision at first. He tried to dismiss the wise woman with a vague promise that he will issue some ‘orders’ (2Sam 14:8). But the Tekoite woman is not content until she receives the desired verdict. She presses on with her speech; and David decides that the son, who by normal law should die, shall live and that the kinsman who in spite of the king’s judgement would kill the son (in accord with the law) would die (2Sam 14:10-11).⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Jacob Hoftijzer. *David and the Tekoite Woman*, 429.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Bellefontaine, *Customary law and citizenship: Judicial aspects of 2Samuel 14:4-21, 47-72*.

⁵⁰ The woman tries to relieve David of any possible risks by taking on herself any consequences of the decision, because in addition to the political risk, David is aware that he also risks possible repercussions from God, by failing to avenge the dead brother’s blood.

Rhetorical considerations

The woman's appeal with respect to Absalom's situation had two specific goals: first that the fratricide should go unpunished, and second that the offender be restored to his former status as son and heir. She got only half of her desire: David suspended the punishment for homicide, but Absalom was not fully restored because he couldn't see the king's face.

The wisdom in the woman's story is not only demonstrated in her ability to extort a decision from David, which could constitute a binding precedent for Absalom, but also because she presents sufficient reasons to convince David to make an exception to a previously pronounced legal decision without being perceived as a weak king, but as a wise king, who is in control. In her speech, the wise woman makes use of imagery, as Alfons Schulz notes:

The woman of Tekoa calls the apparently intended killing of her only son the quenching of the coal left to her (2Sam 14:7). She compares human death with the spilling of water (v. 14). Finally, she, like Achish, calls David an Angel of God (vv. 17-20).⁵¹

The woman concludes her speech with a blessing (v. 17). It is not easy to define. Compared with possible similar cases (1Chr 22:16, 2Chr 19:11, Gen 28:1, 47:10, 2Sam 19:40, 1Kigs 8:66) it seems that the blessing is used as a sign that the speaker preferred to use to end the conversation about a certain subject. This is supported by 2Sam 13:25, where Absalom presses the king to come to the feast, but the king refuses "and blesses him", thus stopping the conversation on the subject. By speaking the blessing, the woman tries to end a very difficult conversation. She is a very wise woman indeed, who is able to carry out a delicate task.⁵² Notwithstanding her vulnerable position, an ordinary person and moreover a woman, she is able to succeed; and neither she nor Joab is punished and Absalom is allowed to return.

⁵¹ Alfons Schulz, "Narrative Art in the Book of Samuel," *Narrative and Novella in Samuel*, H. Gressmann ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 121. He notes that Abigail (1Sam 25:29) and Achish also make use of imagery.

⁵² Nicol considers the Tekoite woman functioning "purely and simply as an agent" who does no more than deliver the words of Joab to the king (2Sam 14.3, 19). However, as we have seen before, there are enough arguments to consider her as a full-fledged character of the narrative. See: George G. Nicol, "The wisdom of Joab and the wise woman of Tekoa," *Studia Theologica*, no. 36/2 (1982): 97.

CONCLUSION

Women in the Books of Samuel are important catalysts in the plot of the narratives. They are present everywhere, shaping the events, and subsequently, shaping the history of Israel.

Literary observations

One of the characteristics we may notice about the women in the Books of Samuel, is the detailed presentation of their story. We get generally much more information regarding them, than in other records of David's history. This shows the importance of these women in influencing Israel's and David's life: they earned more attention than many others.

The other characteristic is the very selective presentation of what have happened. The writer(s) included in their material only what was of vital importance. This is because these narratives are not included as exhaustive histories, but as God-authorized versions of how we should view that history. It supposes that we are going to identify with the point of view of the author.

Theological observations

The delimited portion of the Bible, from Deuteronomy to 2Kings (excluding Ruth), includes the Books of Samuel, is called "Deuteronomistic History." We are not going to argue for, or object to the way the assumptions and applications of this hypothesis are used. But we can make the observation that the double message of hope and condemnation of the so called "Deuteronomistic School" is there, in both the Abigail and the Tekoite woman's narratives, as generally in all the narratives about women in the Books of Samuel. This is because all these stories are not about women, not even about David or Saul, but about the Covenant God of Israel, who keeps His promises and preserves His people among many perils. These narratives about women characters are directing us to the Lord, who does all things through His human, weak, often female instruments.

Practical observations

Abigail is a proof that God has endowed women with unusual attributes of generosity and self-giving. Herein lies their greatest charm. It is seldom that God can use those of great talents, because gifted people are often proud. Abigail was used as a gifted instrument because of her deep humility. God prepares His female tools with great care, in special circumstances, to fit and equip them for the special deeds they are called for.

Jealousy is one of the most despicable of all sins. It destroys even the one who is harbouring it: destroyed Saul, and destroyed Michal as well. God's servants may expect opposition and ridicule from many, but it is the bitterest when these are coming from family and friends. We should always know that any attack on God's chosen servant is an attack against God Himself, who called him to His service. The battle is not ours alone, but His.

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