



*Abigail:
A Patron Model
for Women in the Middle East*

Patronage is a major part of life in many Arab cultures. It impacts how people relate to one another and has implications for how individuals perceive power, position, and authority. I understand patronage as a gateway that grants people access to privilege and decision making and moral obligations. At times patronage can be understood negatively, however, I focus on the positive aspect of patronage in my article where obligations and expectations are meant to achieve positive results, friendly relationships, away from bureaucracy or manipulation in contexts of unequal social relationships. I believe that patronage should be used rightly and righteously based on truth and honesty, not exploitation, titles, or status.

A patriarchal society invariably produces stereotypes that put down, denigrate, or marginalise women. When women are often blamed for difficult situations, the positive view of patronage will have a transforming impact. The unusual accomplishments of Arab women will challenge the patriarchal view in a context managed by men. The patronage Abigail demonstrated seeks client maturity and independence. And this is precisely the sort of patronage I desire for Arab women to exhibit in their role in theological education in the Middle East and beyond.

My Background as an Arab Christian Woman

I was born and grew up in a country where, like many other Arab women, I would normally be viewed as a client not a patron, the weaker link, not the stronger, the dependent, not the one depended on. You may be acquainted with the little town of Bethlehem, and you may have a “romantic” view of the setting of Christ’s birth. You may have even had a once in a lifetime opportunity to visit, but living there all one’s life

one cannot escape the complexities of life on the ground within a Palestinian context. As I write these few lines, I reflect on the contradictions of this place I proudly call home. As an Arab Christian, I am considered from within the minority and as a woman I am considered underprivileged. The predominant, visible patrons in society are the governments and the men, but women are the last to be thought of as patrons. Not because we do not have the potential, but because, in a patriarchal society and also a war-torn land, we are not usually given the rights or privileges to which we are entitled.

In the seventh century, the rise of Islam in the Middle East saw Christians evolve from being a ruling majority to, over time, a ruled minority. With that came the loss of power and patronage. Patronage is inherent within the Arab culture and is considered as a social construct in hierarchical societies. Whilst patronage is evident in the Middle East and has shaped our communities to various extents, Arab women have had few opportunities to identify and reflect on positive and negative aspects of patronage. Therefore, it is important to discuss and relate patronage to the way women might experience and live the good news and hope that comes from knowing Jesus. The story of Abigail, which once happened in my geographical locality, presents Arab women with possibilities of taking the position of patrons. As Arab women often find themselves compelled to find ways to get access to resources and use relationships to achieve things they need, want or dream of fulfilling, some lessons from Abigail's story become pertinent for Arab women seeking to be patrons of peace.

1. Introduction

1 Samuel 25 relates how David vows to destroy Nabal's house and all his possessions because Nabal has refused to help him. David sets out to do so, and had it not been for

a woman, Nabal's wife Abigail, who comes to meet him with a gift and persuasive words, David would certainly have left no one alive. The story shows a woman endowed with wisdom and beauty who, on her own is successful at outmanoeuvring two men: a very wealthy but miserly husband, and a courageous but outlawed young warrior. Thus, the story is interesting in the way it shows that even in a patriarchal society, women can take a lead role and wisely exercise power with great influence, as a patron would. We shall examine how Abigail is able to intervene, as well as the results of her actions.

2. The Background

The story is set against the backdrop of King Saul's reign and of the rise of David from a lowly shepherd to the leader of a private army.¹²¹ Because King Saul is seeking to kill him, David, the new national hero, has to keep on the move in the Judean desert. He survives by collecting protection money from farmers. As it is the sheep-shearing season, David sends ten of his young warriors to pay his respects to one of the largest and wealthiest sheep-farmers in the area, Nabal, who is married to Abigail.

3. The Conflict

The ten lads sent by David deliver a message of peace (v.6). They suggest to Nabal in a diplomatic way, that, as his flocks have suffered no harm and none of his sheep have gone missing (v.7) due to the protection of David's guerrilla band,¹²² some sign of gratitude would be appropriate. The request for a payoff is politely worded (v.7) but it is received by Nabal with utter contempt: 'who is David and who is the son of Jesse?'

¹²¹ Tivka Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Pocks, 2002), 315.

¹²² Frymer-Kensky, *Women*, 316.

(v.10). He calls David's band of fighters 'men coming from who knows where' (v.11). Sakenfeld points out that Nabal's words are both surly and foolhardy,¹²³ whilst Frymer-Kensky comments that Nabal speaks coarsely but that his language is also cleverly insulting: David is at the head of a band of breakaway slaves just like his ancestor Obed (in Hebrew, 'slave').¹²⁴

The angry David cannot leave such an insult unaddressed; he gives the command to his fighters to take up their weapons for a military strike against Nabal's property and possessions. Frymer-Kensky suggests: 'the stage is set for disaster.'¹²⁵ This is when Abigail is prompted into action by the servants' report and takes control of what has become a desperate and volatile situation.

The contrast between husband and wife is quickly established at the beginning of the story. Nabal is described as being 'surly and mean in his dealings' (v.3). According to traditional wisdom, he was someone who behaved in a rude and bad-tempered way and who also lacked generosity, behaving like a fool (Prov 14:17; 18:6). This portrait is reinforced by the negative characterization of Nabal by his wife Abigail: 'just like his name he is; his name means fool and folly is with him' (v.25). By contrast, the narrator describes Abigail as a clever (*tobat sekel* – 'of good understanding')¹²⁶ and beautiful woman (v.3). One can surmise that she had no say in the choice of Nabal as her husband. Her father was probably very pleased to give his daughter as wife to a wealthy sheep-farmer in an arranged marriage.

¹²³ Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives: Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today*. (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 84.

¹²⁴ Frymer-Kensky, *Women*, 317.

¹²⁵ Frymer-Kensky, *Women*, 317.

¹²⁶ Athalya Brenner, *I Am: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 39.

4. Abigail's Intervention

Unlike Nabal, Abigail immediately recognises the gravity of the threat that David and his band of fighters represent to their property and lives. She rushes to counteract the consequences of the insult and bad behaviour of her husband, setting out for a meeting with David (vv.19-20). Abigail's decisive intervention is met with success, as Bach observes: 'For a moment, Abigail steps outside the bounds of convention: a woman succeeds in stopping the future king from committing bloodguilt.'¹²⁷ She pacifies David's anger and so saves her household. We will examine in the following section the causes of her success by focusing on the various clues given by the narrator. This will enable us to give a more precise account of Abigail's ethical world and of the impact she is seeking to achieve through her actions.

5. The Roots of Abigail's Success

5.1 Abigail Empowers Herself as a Woman

Discussing the role of Abigail, Brueggemann makes a very apt comment: 'Her presence has in fact effectively eliminated Nabal.'¹²⁸ Abigail takes the 'lead,' which is typically the reserve of men: one of her most prominent qualities is, therefore, that of taking initiative.

She does not waste any time thinking about what to do; instead, she immediately gets together the things she needs and sets off to meet David (v.18). Abigail's actions seem to indicate that she is in fact in command of household supplies, and she,

¹²⁷ Alice Bach, "The Pleasure of her Text," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 109.

¹²⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 178.

therefore, uses her authority to repair the damages caused by Nabal. Abigail moves out of the expectations of a woman in her culture when she sets out on her own without telling Nabal, her husband, that she is going to meet David. She is not willing to remain home in the hope that the food and drink sent to David will appease his anger. She becomes personally involved and her decision to go and meet David carries considerable risk to her own life, given David's resolve to use violence to avenge himself. Hence, Abigail is both bold and brave when she positions herself to speak directly and persuasively to the furious leader of a band of fighters. Throughout the episode, Abigail is clearly the decision-maker and also the action-taker.

5.2 Abigail's Moral Maturity and Courage

Abigail uses ingenuity and concentrates all her efforts on avoiding violence. She knows that a serious moral wrong has been committed against David and so she seeks forgiveness and mercy from him. The moral injury involves someone responsible for the wrong done, and Abigail knows that her husband is to blame. However, being a pacifier, she herself is ready to accept responsibility for the wrong done to David: 'I, your maidservant, did not see the young men of my lord whom you sent.' She readily accepts that David and the young men have been unjustly treated (v.25). This moral strength enables her to take risks in order to achieve restoration of relationship with David through appeasing his anger and resentment. Her sound moral judgment – she knows what is right and wrong – gives her tremendous confidence to act. Although she is innocent, Abigail accepts responsibility for the wrongdoings of her husband and provides David, the victim, with reasons to forgive.

5.3 She Seeks Reconciliation through Words

When Abigail speaks to David, she is confident in her determination to make a difference and change David's plans. In order to achieve David's change of heart, she seeks to open a dialogue with him, and her speech is persuasive but also honest. Frymer-Kensky describes Abigail's interaction with David as 'a masterpiece of biblical rhetoric.'¹²⁹ The language she uses is powerful and her arguments compelling. In contrast to her husband, she remains humble, addressing David as 'my Lord' and speaking of herself as 'your servant' (vv.24-25). As noted above, she takes all the blame for this unfortunate situation upon herself (v.25). She makes constant reference to Yahweh and to what Yahweh is doing through these events and situations, claiming almost like a prophetess that, through her, the Lord has restrained David from bloodguilt (v.26). In the same prophetic style, she announces a glorious future for David (vv.29-31). So it is not surprising that David accepts her offer of reconciliation by blessing her three times (v.32-33). Commenting on Abigail's successful speech, Brueggemann writes: 'David has taken Abigail seriously and accepted her entreaty... She has saved his life and his future.'¹³⁰

5.4 Abigail is a Quick, Sound and Practical Thinker

Again, Brueggemann is helpful when he observes: 'this shrewd and discerning woman...seems to understand everything,'¹³¹ and Smith comments that from v.14 the story focuses wholly on the 'prompt actions' of a woman, and how men respond to

¹²⁹ Frymer-Kensky, *Women*, 319.

¹³⁰ Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 180.

¹³¹ Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 178.

these actions and the consequences of these actions.¹³² Abigail realises the seriousness of the situation: for her and her household, it is a question of life or death. Yet she is ready for the task of persuading David to think about the consequences of his actions before it is too late. In addition, she discerns wisely what would please David in terms of the food presented to him, the words she uses and her attitude of humility. Abigail would have known that hospitality is a major element within the patronage system. The abundant food offered in Middle Eastern contexts is a sign of acceptance, care, graciousness and, as it transpires in this instance, reconciliation too.

Conclusion

Abigail seeks to protect herself and her household against the mortal dangers caused by her husband. Whereas the men are bent on animosity and conflict, Abigail, as a promoter of peace and reconciliation, seeks to avoid violence at all costs. In the way she behaves and speaks, Abigail exemplifies how skilful thinking can be used to promote peace. One of the key moral attributes to which Abigail is sensitive is gratitude. Her world is one in which a person should respond kindly to a kind action. As a peacemaker, she deals with the wickedness of Nabal and the violence of David – with remarkable wisdom and competence. She discerns the long-term consequences of an attitude of animosity, violence and revenge, and she also enables others to realise the long-term repercussions of rash acts of rage and resentment. Abigail recognises the need to take into account the feelings of other human beings (in this case David) in

¹³² Henry Smith, *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 222.

order to create strong social connections. She respects the dignity of David which her husband disregards, and so treats David with honour. Abigail recognises the importance of owning a property and so seeks to protect it (in contrast to her foolish husband). If Arab women in the Middle East take Abigail as an example, the potential for Arab women patrons will become more embedded within the society thus providing opportunities for demonstrating their own unique skills and attributes in facing difficult situations, particularly while living in a highly volatile context.

Encouraged by the example of Abigail, I have found a space where I can be a patron despite the challenges of an ever-patriarchal society. I am seeking to forge a way forward and craft a role for women in theological education regardless of the hierarchical nature of our society. I aspire to prepare the way for Arab women to be patrons in theological education (TE). Advocating for the importance of the role of Arab women in TE, I am seeking to create a platform to encourage Arab women to find their voice and to strengthen and benefit the academy and church. In this way, I am not only seeking to help Christian women but women from other backgrounds who might find in TE a theoretical and practical answer to some of their questions as they live in harsh contexts that are often full of bloodshed and lack peace.

Obtaining a theologically-based degree carries huge responsibilities for Arab women. When Arab women are theologically trained, they attain a privileged position in which to find creative ways to overcome injustices they encounter on a daily basis. Theology empowers them to have a voice and a calling that is unique to their context. These were the years that formed my own theological convictions. I embraced my God-given calling and resisted stereotypes about Arab women thus structuring relational bridges for the spread of the Gospel through theological education. I did not and will not allow hierarchical relationships expressed within the patronage system to

obstruct the way my fellow Arab women encounter the Good News. I pray that Arab women will be encouraged to see the power of patronage. Even when they are viewed as clients, may they have the courage to rise above that, to find their voice, to express their dreams not only in oral communication but also in writing, so that their words would be read, their actions appreciated, and their wisdom valued. Like Abigail, whose gentle and wise advice defused a volatile situation, so the sound counsel of Christian Arab women, will, I believe, help to prevent ongoing violence and bloodshed in a region so precious to me personally, and also to God's own heart. I envision my Christian Arab women as promoters of peace and reconciliation, expressing godly insights, perceptions and understanding in their conversations and through their written work, which will help to de-escalate violence, hatred, and the inclination for retribution in the region while fostering an environment conducive to sharing the Gospel.

Resources

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