

The story of Abigail, Nabal, and David is a remarkable tale of a triangle with a merited outcome of death for Nabal and a wondrous outcome of love for Abigail and David. David is shown yet again to be under the power of a promise that causes everything in his life to work for good (cf. [Rom. 8:28](#)).

[25:2–8](#). This opening of the narrative skillfully accomplishes two things. First, it characterizes the lead roles played in the drama by Nabal and Abigail. Levenson has observed that Nabal is first encountered in terms of his possession (v. [2](#)). He is very rich. This 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](#)). His personality is characterized as “churlish and ill-behaved” (v. [3b](#)). His name says it all. He is a fool (*nabal*). He is not bad but stupid. He has come to think of himself as an autonomous man, believing that “there is no God” (cf. [Ps. 14:1](#)), no neighbor, and no social reality. He would indeed do as he pleases. He neither fears nor respects any other, nor does he care for any other.

The character of Abigail, his wife, is a complete contrast. She is of “good understanding (*śekel*) and beautiful” (v. [3](#)). Her beauty may have attracted David. It is, however, her “good understanding,” her shrewd common sense, and her cunning way with words that make a crucial difference in the narrative. The combination of “good understanding and beautiful” makes Abigail an obvious counterpart to David himself. They are two of a kind. The word “beautiful” (*yph*) is used of David ([16:12](#)) as of Abigail. But in both cases it is the “heart” (*leb*) and the

“understanding” (*śekel*) that matter in the narrative. Nabal and Abigail exemplify respectively what the wisdom tradition means by “foolish” and “wise.”

David's initial action begins the story by creating a dangerous crisis with Nabal. The provocation of Nabal seems almost deliberate on David's part. David's initial instruction to his men is an act of masterful intimidation (vv. [5–8](#)). David sends word to Nabal during the festival at the time of sheepshearing. David approaches Nabal when his wealth is especially available, visible, and hence vulnerable. David's message begins with conventional words of greeting: “Peace ... peace ... peace” (v. [6](#)).

David's message, however, is not of peace. He sends a message of intimidation and confiscation. The repeated words of peace function ironically to inform Nabal that his peace may be in jeopardy. The greeting is in fact a warning. David reminds Nabal that, thus far, David has done no harm to Nabal's flocks (v. [7](#)). The very reminder is an implicit threat that he might do harm now. David wants from Nabal “whatever you have at hand” (v. [8](#)). Since Nabal has much goods “at hand,” David implicitly asks for an ample amount. David appears to be making a subtle but unmistakable request for protection money. We have been told in [22:2](#) that David's company consisted of malcontents. Now it is clear that David and his unsettled, greedy malcontents are in fact a threat to those who benefit from, value, and maintain a settled pastoral economy.

[25:9–13](#). Nabal no doubt thought David's men were troublemakers, and Nabal will not deal with terrorists. David's men sent the message and “they waited” (v. [9](#)). Nabal responds in indignation (vv. [10–11](#)). Indeed, Nabal responds as any propertied person

might who resents the loss of property to those who are not entitled to it. Who does David think he is? Nabal's rhetorical question does not mean he does not know who David is. He might or he might not. He surely knows David's kind. In Nabal's eyes, David is a nobody. Nabal is engaged in big business. He does not deal with beggars, marauders, gypsies, or tramps. He refuses to pay protection money, either believing the threat is not real or believing he can handle the threat on his own.

David's response to this rebuff is quick and harsh (v. 13). We learn that David has an enormous band, six hundred men, and he dispatches four hundred against Nabal. Indeed, such a subtle threat as was initially delivered has no credibility unless there is enforcement. David is prepared to act forcibly and, if necessary, violently. If the issue is left between Nabal and David, there will be blood—surely Nabal's. David does not flinch from the prospect of shedding blood. The narrator, however, holds that matter in abeyance.

[25:14–22](#). Happily, the simple game of intimidation between Nabal and David is interrupted by a servant who asks Abigail to intervene. The speech of the servant is remarkably one-sided, asserting that David is good and Nabal is bad. In verse 15 the servant's report reiterates exactly David's points from verse 7: There was “no harm” and “nothing was missed.” Indeed, David's men were “very good to us” (v. 15). The narrator has deliberately repeated David's words from the mouth of Nabal's own servant. The speaker who reports to Abigail is one of Nabal's own people, but his comments are sympathetic to David. By this device, the narrator adds intentionally to the impression that David is in the right and that David's perspective is legitimate. The narrator stacks

the cards against Nabal in David's favor. The verdict that David is “very good to us” contrasts nicely with the judgment that Nabal is “good for nothing” (v. 17). These are remarkable words for the servant to speak to the wife of Nabal. Presumably the words were not a new insight to her.

Abigail hurries to intervene. The list of her “gifts” to David (protection money) is extensive and extravagant (v. 18). Abigail is a realist and stands on no principle but acts shrewdly to save her husband and her wealth. Abigail hurries to meet David; she pointedly does “not tell her husband Nabal of her meeting with David” (v. 19). David's reaction to her coming in verses 21–22 is curious. He assumes he will receive no positive response. He asserts that he has “guarded” all of Nabal's goods and gets no good in return. In his ingratiating way, David anticipates that Nabal will return “evil for good” (v. 21). The phrase contrasts precisely with Saul's verdict on David in [24:17](#). The use of both formulas so close together suggests that in both narratives the intent is to suggest that David peculiarly returns good for evil in contrast to those around him, who do not. David is, to be sure, quite selective about when to return good for evil. In this case he is prepared promptly to kill Nabal and all his male servants (v. 22). The term rendered “male” (rsv) in the Hebrew has the crude, explicit reference, “those who piss against the wall.” Thus the male members of Nabal's company are categorized by their method of urination. The phrase is regularly used for those who are despised.

[25:23–31](#). David, however, has misjudged Abigail. Abigail engages in a long, winsome speech in which she shows her extraordinary boldness, common sense, and capacity for effective language. Her speech reverses the

flow of the narrative. She begins with ostensive obeisance and properly shapes the relation as one between “my lord” and “your handmaid” (v. [24](#)). The contrast to Nabal’s surly talk is unmistakable. Abigail first disposes of Nabal as a factor in the negotiations. He is a fool and is not to be taken seriously. Notice again, in verse [25](#), it is “my lord” and “your handmaid.” McCarter suggests that verse [26](#), with its words against vengeance, properly belongs at the end of the narrative. However, in terms of their dramatic power, the actions of Abigail have already resolved the question of vengeance. Her presence has already kept David from killing. Her presence has in fact effectively eliminated Nabal. He has ceased to exist as a serious character in the narrative. Again, in verse [27](#), there is only “my lord” and “your servant.”

In verse [28](#) we arrive at one of the pivotal statements in the entire narrative of David’s rise. We have seen how David’s coming rule is acknowledged by character after character, until finally in [24:20](#) even Saul has conceded. Now, in [25:28](#), even the acknowledgment of Saul is topped by this shrewd and discerning woman, who seems to understand everything. Her acknowledgment of David’s future goes beyond that of Saul in using the formula “sure house,” which parallels the dynastic formula of [2 Samuel 7:16](#). Here the royal formula is almost like an official declaration in the mouth of this wise one. Moreover, either in shrewdness or in theological extravagance, Abigail confirms that David is “fighting the battle of Yahweh” and will do no evil. This remarkable claim seems remote from the actual David of this chapter, who is engaged in racketeering. But Abigail, as the narrator renders her, is playing for high stakes: namely, her own well-being and future. High stakes call for the playing of high cards.

The remainder of Abigail’s speech reads almost like a benediction for this future king (vv. [29–31](#)). The life of “my lord” will be preserved in the care of Yahweh, whereas the lives of his enemies will be rejected (v. [29](#)). “My lord” will have no cause for regret, because he has not taken vengeance. David’s resolve in verse [22](#) was to take harsh vengeance on Nabal. Abigail of course knows of David’s resolve against Nabal and seeks to overcome that ominous threat. The narrator has Abigail know much more than the specifics of this narrative. She also knows, according to the narrative, that David is destined for the throne in Israel.

Abigail’s artful response must deal at the same time with the immediate matter of Nabal and the long-term interest of the throne. Abigail does not want David’s immediate temptation to vengeance to intrude on David’s legitimacy for the throne. Abigail’s promise to David, which dares to echo the promise of Yahweh, is that the throne will surely come, the divine promise will be kept (vv. [28–30](#)). The future is so certain for David that vengeance on Nabal is rendered both unnecessary and unwise. By indirection, Abigail asserts that a great king like David does not need to bear the mark of this little vengeance.

Abigail concludes, “Remember your handmaid” (v. [31](#)). How remember? Remember me when you come to your throne, when you come to your paradise (cf. [Luke 23:42–43](#)). Remember me in gratitude. Remember me as the one who talked sense to you. Remember me as the one who protected your coming regime from the blood of Nabal. Remember me for my own well-being, for unless you remember me, I am left only with this hopeless Nabal.

[25:32–35](#). David’s speech in response is a worthy match for Abigail’s eloquence. It is as though through Abigail’s words of warning David recognizes for the first time how his vengefulness would have put his own future at risk. Notice the parallel situation and the different resolution with Uriah and Bathsheba ([2 Sam. 11–12](#)). In that later narrative there is no Abigail to intervene. David acts by what is “right in his own eyes” ([11:25](#)) and brings an abiding sword into his house ([12:10](#)). But not here. Abigail has made the difference. The startling discovery—indeed, startling self-discovery—causes David to begin his response to Abigail with a threefold formula of blessing:

Blessed be Yahweh . . . who sent you,
Blessed be your discretion,
Blessed be you (vv. [32–33](#)).

The blessings begin with Yahweh. Yahweh has dispatched Abigail, who has saved David from the guilt of murder. David expresses what it would have been like without these blessings (v. [34](#)). Had it not been for Abigail, David would have done in both Nabal and himself. David is persuaded by Abigail and accepts her gifts (v. [35](#); cf. v. [18](#)). David has taken Abigail seriously and accepted her entreaty. David is a free man, free of vengeance—thanks to Abigail. She has saved his life and his future.

[25:36–38](#). Finally the narrator returns to Nabal. His last appearance was his speech of reckless defiance (vv. [10–11](#)). Now he is engaged in a reckless, self-indulgent feast, “very drunk” (v. [36](#)). Abigail had told him nothing before her meeting with David (v. [19](#)). She still does not tell him in the midst of his party (v. [36](#)). Only when he is sobered does she tell him. When he heard his wife’s words “his heart died”; he became like a

stone, and spent ten days dying (v. [37](#)). Was it a stroke that caused him to linger ten days? Did he die because his wife had deceived him? Because David had intimidated him? Because he had lost control of his life? These may be possible explanations, but the narrator is quite explicit about the cause of death. Yahweh smote him (v. [38](#)). What David refrained from doing, Yahweh did. Yahweh took vengeance, as David did not dare to do. Nabal (unwittingly) had affronted the coming king. And he paid. Pitiful Nabal calls to mind the rich man in [Luke 12:16–20](#), who had so much, who self-indulgently celebrated his wealth, and who finally died because he was not “rich toward God” or toward God’s anointed. Abigail was rich toward God and lived. Nabal stands as a powerful warning for all those (including Saul?) who stand in the way of David.

Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990).

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