BET 7.1 (2020) 63-74

ABIGAIL AND NABAL: A BIBLICAL ROLE MODEL FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE

MICHAEL LEFEBVRE[1]

Pastors face some of life's most intimate difficulties with their congregants. God's people are not immune to the strains caused by job loss, family conflicts, and other hardships. A pastor is called to help his or her congregation navigate life's sorrows in faith. Mental health disorders are among the most perplexing burdens to bear with a church member. Thankfully, there are resources available from theologians and clinicians with relevant competencies.[2] But there is room for more. In this paper, I would like to make a small contribution from within the field of biblical studies to add to this body of resources for shepherding families through the strains of mental health care. In particular, I want to explore a case study in the Old Testament that offers affirmation and a biblical role model in the heavy burden of caring for those with characteristics approximating what might today be deemed severe mental illness.

I am referring to the story of Abigail and her care for her husband Nabal as described in 1 Samuel 25. In this account, we are introduced to a man who appears incapable of healthy social interactions, and whose social dysfunction leads to some bad behaviors on his part and certain individuals around him—including David. In telling his story, the text shows us Abigail as a model of grace and wisdom worthy of our respect, caring for her husband in his brokenness and guarding David from mis-responding to Nabal's behaviors. Abigail's example offers a focus of identification and encouragement for those in analogous positions today. I hope to draw out some of those resources in this paper, but let me begin with some important qualifications.

I. THE BIBLE AND MENTAL HEALTH

It is important to state clearly at the outset, that the story of Abigail and Nabal is not written for the purpose of addressing mental illness. In fact, there are no passages in the Bible that address the topic of mental illness,

---

[1] Michael LeFebvre is the Pastor of Christ Church Reformed Presbyterian in Indianapolis, Indiana.

[2] E.g., Matthew S. Stanford, *Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness* (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2008); Mark R. McMinn, *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling: An Integrative Paradigm* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

directly. Mental illness is a modern category that did not exist prior to the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. To raise this point is not to deny the relevance of Scripture for such issues which, after all, tie back to universal human brokenness; but I raise this point to caution against trying to make the Scriptures answer modern forms of inquiry into mental health.

Human beings have experienced phenomena of mental anguish and personality afflictions all through history. The ancient Mesopotamians documented rudimentary mental afflictions in the cuneiform medical texts, along with primitive diagnoses and treatments.[3] The Greeks developed the theory of humors to explain various moods and inclinations, a framework to link certain personality traits to blood "chemistry" which continued to dominate social thought until the rise of modern medicine.[4] It is not hard to find evidence of efforts to make sense of mental imbalances all through human history. But it was only as recently as 1808 that the term "psychiatry" was coined to embody the concept of truly medical treatments for afflictions—as physiological afflictions—which were traditionally ascribed to the soul (Gk., *psyche* + *iatrikos*).[5] The modern system of psychiatric diagnosis and treatment only emerged in the Twentieth-century, particularly with the introduction of the *Statistical Manual for the Use of Institutions for the Insane* in 1917, followed by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) developed in the wake of World War II and updated most recently with DSM-5 in 2013.

We should not expect the biblical authors to anticipate modern categories like "schizophrenia" or "depression," nor to interact at all—affirmatively or critically—with the notion of brain health as determining mind health. And certainly, we should not presume to "diagnose" biblical characters like Nabal using modern classifications. First Samuel 25 is obliquely relevant to the topic of mental health, but does not contain sufficient information to make diagnoses in psychiatric terms. Nevertheless, the Nabal narrative does provide its own native "diagnosis" of this man's disordered condition from within its own period's comprehension of traits and derived behaviors. "As his name, so he is," Abigail explains to David. "Nabal is his name and *nebalah* is with him" (1Sam 25:25, a.t.) There does appear to be something deeper than "bad character choices" identified with Nabal in this passage. Nabal's story seems to go beyond behavioral problems, but evinces underlying psychological brokenness and sociopathic traits.

Furthermore, although Nabal's apparent mental brokenness was combined with very bad behavior, the two are not automatically connected. Thankfully, many individuals who carry the burden of psychiatric disorders do so with grace. As we reflect on an example like Nabal, we must do so

[3] Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 80–81.

[4] Gerald D. Hart, "Historical Review: Descriptions of Blood and Blood Disorders before the Advent of Laboratory Studies," *British Journal of Haematology 115* (2001): 720–22.

[5] Johann Christian Reil coined the term with the explicit goal to create a branch of medicine for mental conditions previously dealt with as spiritual or judicial cases. *Beytrage zur Beforderung einer Curmethode auf psychischem Wege* (1808), 169.

with sensitivity to avoid turning his story into a stereotype for mental health. Individuals with strong mental health are probably just as apt as those with severe disorders to adopt bad behaviors and flawed character. The Nabal narrative presents us with an example of what appears to be a mental health disorder combined with bad behavior, but this is not always the case.

It will be important to proceed with these qualifications on the application of Scripture to mental health questions.

II. The Passage in Context

It is also important to note that this paper explores tertiary features of the passage at hand. Nabal's personal traits are part of the backdrop of the story's main message, which is actually about David and not really Abigail or Nabal. Most commentators regard the Nabal narrative as a literary window into David's character, revealing insights into David's succession to the throne after Saul. Notably, this story appears between two accounts of David bypassing opportunities to kill Saul, thereby sparing the king's life. Jon Levenson explains:

> It is not hard to see why 1 Samuel 25 is spliced between the two variants of the tradition of David's sparing of Saul's life. In each case, David perceived a powerful advantage in killing, but is restrained by a theological consideration. In chaps. 24 and 26, that consideration is the foulness of slaying "YHWH's anointed" (1 Sam 24:11; 26:9); in chap. 25, it is, in Abigail's words, that "…when YHWH has appointed you ruler over Israel, it should not be a cause for you to stumble or to lose your courage that you shed blood without cause..." (1 Sam 25:30–31).[6]

Most scholars have adopted Levenson's identification of the Nabal narrative as an instance of "narrative analogy,"[7] where one story serves to elucidate the narratives it accompanies. The passage takes a real event in David's life and gives it a parable-like telling. It is remarkably stylized and lacking in the color that is typical of biblical narrative. Stephen Chapman notes,

> Ordinarily, the glory of Hebrew narrative lies in its astonishing three-dimensional characterizations, in which persons are hardly ever all good or all bad but thoroughly realistic composites. It is highly exceptional to find characters that are all good [e.g., Abigail]...or all bad (e.g., Nabal). Even more unusual is the symbolic identification

[6] Jon D. Levenson, "I Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 40* (1978): 23. Cf., Mark E. Biddle, "Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertextuality and Characterization," JBL 121, no. 4 (2002): 617–38; Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal, and the "Son of Jesse": Readings in 1 Samuel 16-25*, LHBOT 497 (New York, T. & T. Clark, 2009), 67–70.

[7] Robert Alter, "A Literary Approach to the Bible," *Commentary* 60, no. 6 (1975): 70–77.

between a particular character and a representative virtue or vice (e.g., [Nabal =] foolishness).[8]

The Nabal narrative is really a roundabout story about David's internal struggle whether to kill Saul, and whether David will adopt the grace of Abigail or the churlishness of Nabal. For example, Barbara Green suggests, "The character Nabal is a thinly disguised Saul; Abigail resembles the Jonathan-like presence mediating between 'Nabal-the-Saul' and his opponent; and the character named David is David-out-of-control, galloping to do his worst to 'Nabal-the-Saul' who has so affronted him."[9] Other scholars suggest different ways of assessing the allegorical details of the narrative. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the story takes a real event in David's life,[10] and schematizes it into an allegory-like retelling that is actually appropriated as a window into David's restraint against killing Saul in the framing chapters.[11]

Recognizing this as the mainline intention of the Nabal narrative, it is important to appreciate the tertiary nature of the present paper's use of the text. Nevertheless, the text's stylized character may actually prove to be an advantage for this study. By taking the real person Nabal and flattening his description to fit period stereotypes, the text—for all its gaps in detail—offers us a helpful insight into the way period Hebrew classified such dysfunction. Just as the stylized Sherlock Holmes stories reveal very little about real life detectives in Victorian England, but can tell us some interesting things about how period audiences conceived of detectives, the adaptation of Abigail's husband to fit the "textbook *nebalah*" in period thought actually heightens the account's usefulness for present purposes.

In this passage, we meet a man whose mental and social brokenness lead to behavioral failures due to his wrong responses to that brokenness. We also meet his wife, Abigail, who is a model of grace in her care for Nabal and those impacted by his dysfunction.

[8] Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016),189.

[9] Barbara Green, *David's Capacity for Compassion: A Literary-Hermeneutical Study of 1-2 Samuel*, Library of Hebrew Bible Old Testament Studies, Volume 641 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 101. Cf., Barbara Green, "Enacting Imaginitively the Unthinkable: 1 Samuel 25 and the Story of Saul," *BibInt 11*, no. 1 (2003): 1–23; *How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel*, Library of Hebrew Bible Old Testament Studies, Volume 365, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 367–410.

[10] It must be a real event, since it results in David's marriage to a new wife who bears David children who figure elsewhere in his life story (1 Sam. 27:3; 30:5; 2 Sam. 3:3; 1 Chron. 3:1).

[11] "Because of the Nebal incident, we are much more aware now of how easy it would be for David to put an end to Saul's hunting him like 'a partridge in the mountains' (26:20), by turning on his pursuer in vengeance" (Francesca Aran Murphy, *1 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010], 26).

III. The Depiction of Nabal

The narrative's opening verses (vv. 2–3) introduce Nabal as a man of great wealth. In fact, only after describing the man's extensive wealth does the narrator add the ironic twist, that this wealth belonged to a man whose "name…was Nabal" and that "the man was harsh and badly behaved" (v. 3). This behavior is consistent with the man's name. When used as a generic term (rather than a name), the verb nabal and its noun form nebalah are commonly translated as "fool" or "to be a fool." The translation "fool" is suitable in certain passages, but the rendering is imprecise and not necessarily suitable to all situations. It prejudices our view of Nabal, and skews our appreciation for the complexities of the story, to invoke the label "fool" unadvisedly.[12]

The term *nabal/nebalah* is, indeed, one of the various antonyms for "wisdom" (*hakam*) in biblical Hebrew,[13] but the peculiar nuance of the term is lost in the generic translation "fool." Anthony Phillips explains:

> The noun *nebalah* is, of course, related to the verb *nabal* usually rendered 'to be foolish, senseless', the opposite of *ḥakam* 'to be wise'. Behind the Hebrew concept of wisdom lies the idea that life is ordered by basic rules which man can discern from his experience. The wise were those skilled in seeing the order in things, how one thing related to another, how society functioned, how the natural world and science worked. They looked at relationships, objects and ideas, and tried to discern their pattern, structure, rule and order… They were the men who knew what to say in an awkward situation, and by saying it brought about peace and harmony…Folly, therefore, consists in failing to observe life's essential rules. The fool is unable to see the order in things, says the wrong thing at the wrong moment, and take action which results in unruliness and disorder.[14]

That is an awfully broad spectrum of social dysfunction to be covered by one term! Unfortunately for our purposes, the biblical writers did not distinguish between mental obstacles to healthy social interactions on the one hand, and moral rebellion against social norms on the other. Consequently, the term *nabal/nebalah* is ascribed both to those we would regard as sinfully foolish—one whose "heart is busy with iniquity, to practice ungodliness" (Isa. 32:6)—as well as those who are simply naive or socially inept, lacking the awareness for refined speech (Prov. 17:7). In the case of Abigail's husband, however, the term seems to point to psychological brokenness underlying his bad behaviors—what today might be diagnosed as a mental health disorder. While it is impossible to diagnose someone with

---

[12] Breuggemann somewhat uncharitably but helpfully makes this distinction, saying, "He is not bad but stupid." (Walter Breuggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990], 175.)

[13] Trevor Donald, "The Semantic Field of 'Folly' in Proverbs, Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes," *Vetus Testamentum* 13, no. 3 (1963): 285–92.

[14] Anthony Phillips, "NEBALAH—A Term for Serious Disorderly and Unruly Conduct," *VT* 25, no. 2 (1975), 237–8.

certainty through a written narrative, the implications seem compelling in Nabal's case. Nabal is described as a man who is incapable of recognizing social nuances or reading the intentions of others, and who lives out of those misperceptions in sinful behaviors.[15]

The presenting scenario unfolds around preparation for a feast day at the end of the agricultural year.[16] "[Nabal] was shearing his sheep in Carmel...[And it was] a feast day" (vv. 2, 8). Shearing sheep was among the final products of the farming year, indicating this feast was a celebration of the whole year's bounty with the barns full of grain, fruits, olive oil, wine, and the other increase now capped off with the sheep's wool (cf., Abigail's prepared fruits in v. 18). David and his men had assisted in the protection of Nabal's sizable flocks, so it was proper that Nabal would provide for David and his men along with his own shepherds during the year end feast.

The Mosaic instructions for Israel's harvest festivals are illuminating in this regard. Deuteronomy 16:13–15 reflects the custom of shared feasting, "when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns...so that you will be altogether joyful." It was in keeping with Hebrew practice (as well as general oriental "laws of hospitality")[17] that David's men would expect some benefit from the resulting abundance after their service to Nabal's shepherds. That Nabal refused them participation in the festival is itself disturbing (vv. 10–11). But what the text reports about Nabal's thinking around that refusal is especially revealing.

David presented his request with great humility. David's speech is "over-the-top" in its eloquence as the narrator seems keen to be clear that David's approach was faultlessly polite (vv. 6–8). Furthermore, after reporting on his labors to support Nabal's shepherds, David urged Nabal to verify those claims for himself with the shepherds. "Ask your young men," David said, "and they will tell you" (v. 8). Later in the narrative, the shepherds do confirm these claims when they speak to Abigail, "The men [of David] were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we did not miss anything when they were in the fields, as long as we went with them. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with

[15] Note the *Kethib* reading of Nabal's introduction in verse 3: "but the man was harsh and badly behaved; he was a Calebite (*Kethib*, and he was like his heart)." Marjorie Boyle argues that the *Kethib* reading is correct and links Nabal's bad behavior with his heart, thus providing the backdrop for his demise when "his heart died within him" (v. 37). Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "The Law of the Heart: The Death of a Fool (1 Samuel 25)," *JBL* 120, no. 3 (2001): 401–27. Cf., Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal*, 58–9.

[16] The timing of events (i.e., after the sheep shearing) would fit with the Feast of Booths in the seventh month, although the feast in view is never named in the text and this would be a local (rather than pilgrimage) celebration of Booths if indeed that festival.

[17] George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 136–9; David H. Jensen, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Theological Commentary on the Bible,* Belief (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 149–50.

them keeping the sheep" (vv. 15–16). But Nabal never checked with his shepherds himself. Instead, in spite of David's impeccable etiquette and offered references, Nabal was defensive and immediately charged David with attempting to steal from him.

"Nabal answered David's servants, 'Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?'" (vv. 10–11). Contrary to proper neighborliness and the spirit of the harvest festival, Nabal ascribed to David a presumption of criminality (runaways and marauders)[18] and regarded his request as an unjust attempt to take something to which he had no right. There is no indication that Nabal invented this response out of mere stinginess (though a lack of generosity seems to be present), but the implication is that Nabal was genuinely oblivious to the graciousness of David's request (see vv. 6–8) and really perceived his appeal as an unjust attack. In other words, the narrator demonstrates sensitivity to dysfunction at the perceptual level of Nabal's responses—the kinds of traits we might look for to identify and treat psychiatric disorders today.

This reading of the passage is supported by the description of Nabal by his servants, when they later reported these events to Nabal's wife Abigail. "Behold...our master...screamed ('it)[19] at them...He is such an irrational (*beliya'al*)[20] man that one cannot speak to him" (vv. 14–17, a.t.) Nabal's inability to entertain David's message as the polite request it was, seems to have been characteristic. His own servants regarded Nabal as unapproachable and prone to habitual anger stirred by his inaccurate perceptions of others. Nabal is treated by the narrative as fully culpable for his bad behavior. Nevertheless, the narrator also demonstrates awareness of an underlying dysfunction in Nabal's capacity to understand basic social interactions around him which contributed to his tragic responses.

It is for these reasons that the narrative identifies the man by the name "Nabal," which certainly was not his given name. Scholars generally agree that "the historical figure's real name has been suppressed in order to give him a name indicative of his character."[21] The term *nabal* is so deprecatory

[18] Within the mainline emphasis of the story, Nabal's charge is surely an allusion to David's having fled from King Saul, and to his men as similarly escaping from various distresses (1Sam 22:2). Levenson, "I Samuel 25," 15–16.

[19] "The related noun '*ayiṭ* refers to a bird of prey, which presumably makes a similar sound" (Chapman, 1 Samuel, 189 n. 45).

[20] *beliya'al* is a difficult to translate term which conveys the notion of being worn out, empty, vapid, or devoid of worth, principle, or sense/reason. It typically has the connotation of being morally corrupt, but that is not the term's meaning as much as the implication of the term's proper reference to something "lacking" in a person's soul. (*NIDOTTE* #1162.)

[21] Levenson, "I Samuel 25," 14. Steven McKenzie speculates that Nabal's real name might have been Jether based on 1 Chronicles 2:17 which identifies Amasa as the son of Abigail by Jether (cf., Ithra in 2Sam 17:25). (Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 97; cf., Jon D. Levenson, Baruch Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages," *JBL* 99.4 [1980], 507–18.) However, this is an unlikely coincidence of names.

that "it seems inconceivable that parents would give their child such a dreadful name."[22] Attempts to identify a plausible Hebrew name using another variation of the form *nbl* which might have been adapted into this negative characterization as *nabal* have proven unconvincing (e.g., *nebel*, "wineskin," Akk. *nablum*, "flame").[23] It is generally assumed that Abigail's husband had a different name altogether which has not been preserved, and that "Nabal" was a pejorative nickname (i.e., a "popular diagnosis") by which he came to be known by the surrounding community. It is this commonly adopted nickname for the man which Abigail was compelled to reveal, and to explain to David to alleviate his anger at being so abusively answered by the man. "Let not my lord regard this irrational (*beliya'al*) fellow, Nabal, for as his designation (*shem*) is, so is he. Nabal is his designation (*shem*), and *nebalah* is with him" (v. 25, a.t.).

IV. ABIGAIL'S INTERVENTION

It is hard to imagine what it must have been like for Abigail to be married to Nabal. The text gives us no information to determine—and no license to speculate—concerning their relationship beyond the remarkable efforts reported on her part to care for him. The allegorical nature of the account employs cutout portrayals of both Nabal and Abigail that leave us unable to penetrate beyond the stereotypes. But these stereotypes describe a woman who is at once both clear-eyed concerning her husband's brokenness and prudent in his care.

In the same paragraph where Nabal is introduced as "harsh and badly behaved," Abigail is given the opposite depiction. "The woman was discerning (*tobat-sekel*) and beautiful" (v. 3). Abigail's capacity to read the circumstances and persons around her (*tobat-sekel*) is the precise counterpart to her husband's oblivion (*nabal*) to his social surroundings. And her actions all through the narrative demonstrate the counterpoint. It is the stark "point and counterpoint" nature of these two characters that is among the indications we are dealing with a stylized narrative.[24]

Abigail is only brought into the story after Nabal's response to David created a crisis. David lacked context to understand Nabal's response, so he called his men to arms to answer Nabal's injustice. David's determination to kill Nabal and all the men of his house is overly harsh—and immorally so (v. 22). Biblical law does not countenance the wholesale slaughter of a household for refusal to pay wages. However, while David's overreaction is another exaggerated feature of the narrative, the core sense of injustice motivating David is legitimate. Nabal had deprived David's men of their due payment. "About four hundred men went up after David" to pursue vengeance, "while two hundred stayed with the baggage" (v. 13). With

[22] Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal*, 54.

[23] Levenson, "I Samuel 25," 14; Joseph Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal, and the "Son of Jesse"*: Readings in 1 Samuel 16–25 (LHBOTS 497; New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 53–4; Stephen Pisano, "Nabal," ABD 4.969.

[24] Breuggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 176.

this danger looming, Nabal's servants turned to Abigail. "Now therefore know [what is happening] and consider what you should do" (v. 17). Only Abigail would be able to calm the trouble and discern a solution. Indeed, she goes behind her husband's back (v. 19)[25] to provide the festival gifts that he ought to have given to David's men (vv. 18–20), she speaks to David to mollify his overreaction to Nabal (vv. 23–35), and then she speaks to her husband only after he is in a proper disposition for her approach (vv. 36–37). Notably, Abigail's speech to David comprises the largest portion of the entire narrative (vv. 23–31).

Abigail begins her speech by asking David to disregard her husband on account of his "irrationality (*beliya'al*)" and to redirect the obligation (i.e., "guilt") for the unpaid debt upon her—which she promptly pays from her own access to household resources. "On me alone, my lord, be the guilt. Please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. Please let not my lord regard this irrational (*beliya'al*) fellow, Nabal, for as his designation (*shem*) is, so is he. Nabal is his designation (*shem*), and *nebalah* is with him. But I your servant did not see my lord's young men whom you sent... But now regard this present which your servant has brought to my lord and let it be given to the young men who walk in the footsteps of my lord. Clear now the trespass of your servant" (vv. 24–28, a.t.).

Levenson describes Abigail's intervention as "a rhetorical masterpiece."[26] She successfully threads the needle in a way that neither excuses her husband's folly nor acts in disloyalty to him. Furthermore, she exposes to David the true character of the situation, thereby leading David to realize the injustice of his own misguided reaction. Explaining Nabal's incompetence places an entirely new light on the situation for David. David now realizes that he would have been the one to incur sin—"bloodguilt" (v. 26) for "shed[ding] blood without cause" (v. 31)—if he had proceeded to deal with Nabal at face value, without appreciating the complicating confusion behind Nabal's cruelty.

David accepted Abigail's payment as full satisfaction of what was owed, and he blessed both the Lord and Abigail for her wisdom. He commended Abigail for her "discretion (*ta'am*)" to so wisely read the situation, and he admits that he would have been guilty of shedding innocent blood had he killed Nabal under the circumstances as he now understands them (v. 33). Then "he said to her, 'Go up in peace to your house. See, I have obeyed your voice, and I have granted your petition'" (v. 35).

The irony of the story is that Nabal was celebrating his feast and getting drunk back at home (v. 36), while his wife was intervening, without his knowing it, on his behalf. She tactfully waited until Nabal was in a better mental state the next morning before relating to him what had happened

---

[25] Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Second Edition, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 10 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 249.

[26] Levenson, "I Samuel 25," 19. Cf., Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary,* Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 203–4; Breuggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 178–9.

(v. 37). In a sudden and bizarre conclusion, Nabal suffered a heart attack or some other cardiac event; and, roughly ten days later, he died (vv. 37–38). Some undisclosed time after that, David learned of Nabal's death and sought Abigail's hand in marriage.

This strange conclusion serves the mainline analogical purpose of the narrative well, even if it seems a disappointing result in our (and Abigail's!) concern for Nabal. The mainline purpose of the narrative is to offer a window into David's inner struggle and his final determination to restrain his desire for revenge against King Saul. The purpose of the Nabal narrative is to show David that he can wait upon the Lord to remove Saul without taking vengeance himself, and thus the fact that God struck Nabal was an important part of David's learning to leave King Saul's judgment in God's hands. Ultimately, Abigail personified wisdom and served to teach David restraint—thereby, keeping David from becoming a *nebalah* himself. "Abigail provides a lesson in what makes a good ruler: one who is not out for personal vengeance, for that issue is up to the Holy God."[27]

As an analogical narrative, the story's outcome with Nabal's death at God's hand (and not David's) serves its broader purpose well. But it remains a tragedy that Nabal died. Indeed, Abigail's whole effort had been crafted to save his life, even if the Lord had other purposes ultimately in mind.

V. CONCLUSION

The narrative of Abigail and Nabal is one of the most curious episodes in 1 Samuel. And while it is not directly about mental health, it does provide an affirming testimony for those who face the burdens of caring for loved ones with psychiatric disorders.

Abigail's model should not be used as a prescriptive "how to" example. There is nothing in this passage that suggests readers should absolutize Abigail's actions as "the right way" to deal with social dysfunction. Someone who watches a Jane Austen movie might find the depiction of period dancing quite fascinating, but these cinematic depictions are insufficient to serve as a video course on "how to do the dances of the Regency period." Likewise, the present narrative is descriptive of one event and contains insightful but incomplete details about period perspectives on mental dysfunction.

Notwithstanding the text's limits for prescription, it is an extremely useful description of one biblically commended woman that can serve as meaningful encouragement in relatable trials in faith experienced by others. Abigail shows us that we are not alone in the strain of picking up the pieces in the pressure to compensate for a loved one's vulnerabilities. Abigail offers a literary "soul mate" for those who share the struggle to protect something close to a normal life for a suffering loved one, though frequently beset by crises that threaten to bring everything crashing down. The story of Abigail shows us the grace of those who, on the one hand, cover a loved one's stigma

[27] Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary,* Reading the Old Testament, Volume 8 (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 135.

and, on the other, must discern when and how those disabilities need to be explained to offer context for those offended by them.

Abigail's story is not a "one size fits all" rule book or "how to" guide. A passage like this helps to train our sensibilities for navigating such difficult mental health issues wisely, but these are ultimately matters of biblically informed wisdom and not biblical prescription. Abigail is an example of love for the mentally broken, and in Scripture's declaration of God's blessing upon her discretion and grace in this calling (vv. 32–33), there is a vicarious word of blessing for those who walk in comparable paths today. Abigail's story contains pastoral encouragement for those called to care for loved ones with mental health afflictions.

Nabal's example is a "worst case" kind of story. There is nothing redeeming in his responses to his afflictions in this narrative. While Abigail does everything right in this story, Nabal does everything wrong. It is a deliberately flattened retelling of what was likely a more nuanced event in its actual occurrence. Because the mainline purpose of the narrative is to show David's transformation from his own Nabal-like "folly" to adopt more Abigail-like discretion, both Abigail and Nabal are given static presentations through the whole story. This realization should lead us not to generalize Nabal's "worst case" example, nor to despair of hope for better fruits in others who exhibit similar dysfunction. There are other passages of Scripture that we can turn to for encouragement in our prayers for healing and redemption. Nevertheless, this story's honor for Nabal's value in spite of his "worst case" behaviors, and its commendation of Abigail's care for Nabal, are inspirational features for those who feel hopeless as well as those who are faced with less severe cases than depicted in this account.

Perhaps one of the most important features of the text is its repeated attention to Abigail's "discernment" and "discretion" (vv. 3, 17, 24, 33, 35). This thread traced through the account is instructive for the church as a whole, in our attitudes toward mental and social dysfunction. It is far too convenient to ignore the mentally afflicted or, even worse, to deny the validity of psychiatric care. Matthew Stanford observes,

> A dangerous and damaging battle—a battle between faith and psychiatry/psychology—is being waged daily in churches throughout the world. And lives are being destroyed. Men and women with diagnosed mental illness are told they need to pray more and turn from their sin. Mental illness is equated with demon-possession, weak faith, and generational sin. The underlying cause of this stain on the church is a lack of knowledge, both of basic brain function and of scriptural truth.[28]

First Samuel 25 shows the church that it is important to exercise discernment as we strive to understand, accommodate, instruct, care for, hold to account, and love people even in the most difficult instances of mental affliction. And we need to come alongside the many "Abigails" in

[28] Stanford, *Grace for the Afflicted*, 4.

our churches who bear this burden daily, in order to support and encourage them in their important ministry.