

“DISASTER IS HANGING OVER OUR MASTER AND HIS WHOLE HOUSEHOLD...”(1 SAM. 25:17): CONTEXTUALIZING ABIGAIL’S ROLE IN THE QUEST FOR PEACE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Most times, it seems peace keeping mission is perpetually the prerogative function of the government and as such individuals and communities exonerate themselves and allow unguided utterances and mind-sets ruin the land. In the traditional setting of the pre-colonial period traditional means were used to restore peace in homes and in tribal conflicts. In the Nigerian society today, talks and proposals are on, in favour or against community policing because the traditional system of securing the life and property of the people is broken down and is now rested on the executive arm of government. But we are told in the Hebrew Bible of Abigail who single-handedly assuage the anger of David and stopped the shedding of innocent blood. Within this context we have looked at issues in some trouble rocked communities in Nigeria and have discovered that, the best method of cleaving to peace is through dialogue, using the Abigail’s strategy of peacemaking as an exemplar. This study will use the inculturation approach to bring to bare peace in the society.

Keywords: Peace, Nigeria

Introduction

In the patriarchal household of ancient Israel was Nabal the head of the Nabal’s family and his wife Abigail. Nabal means churl, was a wealthy rancher. He resided in a town named Maon and pastured his flocks on the border of Judah at Camel at a place now known as el-Kurmul.ⁱ The text and the pericope of 1 Samuel 25 was a call for special intervention in Nabal’s

household, the call also anchored a display of wisdom that thwarted the velocity of the destruction. Every individual, household, family, tribe and nation at a point in time or the other cries for help at a looming danger or disaster, as seen in most of Nigerian tribes. In the Nigerian context, most tribes, clans and villages are currently involved in inter-wars because of boundary issues or unwarranted killings as it is within the Ogoni tribes. In a critical situation, the method of approach to a rising situation could resonate or generate catastrophe or peace. The unruly behaviour of Nabal towards the messengers of David and by extension David was brought to the notice of Abigail the wife of Nabal. Nabal seems to be a man of an unequalled temperament; hence he played the role of a fool as his name indicates. But the timely intervention of Abigail quelled the anger of David and stopped him from destroying the household of Nabal and from shedding both guilty and innocent blood.

In this study, we shall lay contextual issues alongside narratives to enable us illuminate the text so as to give breadth and depth to the results of our interpretation. The approach has the advantage of avoiding an abstract concern about what the author might have intended. Rather, in the juxtaposition of text and context, we are concerned about what issues faced by our contemporary audience might have been addressed.ⁱⁱ The study is adopting the inculturation approach to highlight both text and readers context. The approach is an offshoot of both contextualization and indigenization as advocated by Ukpog, accordingly he explains that the Christian theologian must take seriously the historical circumstance of revelation and should not separate the divine message from its cultural expression. Thus the theologian task consists in rethinking the Christian message in the light of the local cultural background and re-expressing it in terms of the local cultural situation. This means that, the African traditional customs, beliefs and practices, as well as contemporary political, economic, social and moral issues in society and in the Hebrew Scripture are to be exposed to critical reflection.

Therefore this article focuses on the dexterous role of Abigail and as a legendary for women of this generation to emulate her method as bridge builder for her household and how she stopped unnecessary bloodshed in ancient Israel.

Dwelling on the text and textual context

The text 1 Sam 25: 17 is embodied in the narrative of first Samuel chapter 25. In the Jewish canon the two books of first and second Samuel were originally one volume. They were divided by the translators of the Septuagint (LXX). The LXX named them “The First and Second Books of Kingdoms.” The Latin Vulgate called them “First and Second Kings.” The

title “First and Second Samuel” comes from the Hebrew which calls the book set “Samuel A and Samuel B.”ⁱⁱⁱ They form part of the Historic Books because they provide a history of Israel from the end of Judges Period to the last years of David. First and Second Samuel are said to be part of Deuteronomistic History (DH) that traces the history of Israel from the conquest to the exile. Geisler argues that, the books may have been completed after Solomon’s death in 931 B.C. since there is a reference to the divided monarchy (1Sam. 27:6). Secondly the books seem to have been written before the captivity of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.^{iv} Hence, the editors of Deuteronomistic History used already existing narratives in the time of the exiles and added interpretive materials at different point maybe probably.^v

The text 1 Samuel 25:17 is taken as the main text of appraisal because of the wordiness of the passage. The content of the verse intrigued Abigail to action and ordered the course of the chapter. From the Masoretic Text of 1Samuel 25:17

.wyl`a@ rB@D~m! lu~Y~!B+~/B# aWhw++ w)tyB@-IK` lu~w+ Wnyn@d)a&-la# hu`r`h` ht`l+k`-yk! yc!u&T~-hm~ ya!r+W yu!D+ hT`u~w+

“Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him” (1Sam 25:17 NIV). The King James Version puts it this way, “Now therefore know and consider what thou will do; for evil is determined against our master, and against all his household: for he is such a son of Belial, that a man cannot speak to him.”

Within this text is the succinct clause that is heart piercing ‘... disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household...’ The words are: is determined upon or is hanging over, the Hebrew word ht`l)+K` (kal`tah) which basic idea of the root is “to bring a process to completion,” “be finished” it is in the third person singular feminine. As a verb in the Hebrew Bible it occurs about 210 times. Its intransitive meaning in the Qal stem h`l`k (kalah) means to be completed. Transitivity it appears in the piel form in an intensive and active voice “disaster is hanging over,” a death warrant that looms over Abigail and Nabal’s home; as it is seen in the story of Ruth and Boaz where she determined to glean with the maidens of Boaz to the end of the barley harvest (Ruth 2:23). Ruth’s determination was to have enough barley by the end of the season that is, completing her act. It also means to be consumed; it is a transitive situation where something will continually add until it is full or complete for destruction. *Kalah* sometimes means in the positive “making a firm decision.” David tells Jonathan that if Saul is very angry, “be sure that evil is determined by him” (1Sam. 20:7).^{vi} The servant told Abigail, “for evil is determined against our master” (1Sam.

25:17). This was the situation of Abigail; she got a preview of how her household would be destroyed by David through the help of a servant of the home if nothing was done. David was ready to exterminate Nabal's household. This situation prompted her to intervene in the matter even though it was a man's affair in a man's world.^{vii}

This concise text speaks within a larger context of the household of Abigail and Nabal (1Sam 25:2-44). Scholars have contributed much on it and looking at it thematically, Akanni and Weanzana put it as Abigail: a woman in the gap: they felt she stood between angry David who was ready to kill as a way of paying evil for evil for the insult on his person by Nabal. Abigail braced in and quieted the situation by making peace.^{viii} Ekanem sees Abigail as: saving grace: Abigail saved her husband and household by taking a fast decision and making a fast move by stopping the onslaught of David and his men on her family. Olujinmi and Jegede acknowledge Abigail as: an astute communicator: she used her feminine linguistic prowess to captivate David's attention from destroying Nabal's family.^{ix} In this article we distinguish Abigail as a bridge builder: there seems to be a broken relationship between David and Nabal; Abigail was able to bridge it and rebuild the situation. The players in this story line includes: Nabal's servant, David's servants, David, Abigail and Nabal.

Abigail was the wife of Nabal and within the fugitive years of David and his followers; David had camped near Nabal lands and livestock. Rather than raid Nabal's flocks they had helped to protect the shepherds and sheep. Hence, when it was time for sheep-shearing David sent his men to Nabal to have a taste of the feast and to be appreciated. Nabal was a wealthy man, the extent of his wealth is emphasised by the record of his livestock (1Sam. 25:2-3a). He was a man of means with plenty to share with others and to make profit but ironically that was not the disposition of Nabal towards David and his men.^x Because according to Baldwin in ancient Israel, sheep-shearing was traditionally celebrated by feasting, with enough to eat and to spare.^{xi} It was an apt situation of this magnitude that David and his men were least appreciated and were accused by Nabal as outlaws. When David heard Nabal's insult on his person, he was furious and immediately set out with his men to destroy every male in Nabal's household.

Nabal's herdsmen who observed what happened between David's servants and Nabal, hurriedly informed Abigail of the disaster that awaits the family if things are not put under proper perspective. Abigail on that note assembled foodstuffs and set out to intercept David and his men who were on their way to Maon in the Carmel region, the home of Nabal and Abigail to eliminate every male before the break of the day. Abigail interrupted David's action, when she spoke to him soothing words that melted his ego and stopped him from shedding the blood of innocent servants, children and the

blood of guilty Nabal. In this feat certain feminine prowess where put in place, we shall consider them.

The noble values of Abigail

Abigail had noble values that should be appreciated and be emulated by women of all times. Before we consider the principles she stands for, what does her name signify. Abigail means “father of joy, my (Divine) father is joy” that is, one who gives joy. This name was used by one or two Old Testament women. It is either, Abigail the wife of Nabal and later David (1Sam.25:3-42; 2Sam.2:2; 1Chro. 3:1) or Abigail the sister or half-sister of David and the mother of Amasa (2Sam. 17:25; 1Chro. 2:16-17).^{xii} In this context we speak of Abigail the wife of Nabal and later David. Although the two names may belong to one and the same person, meaning David got married to his sister as it is in (Gen. 12:13) where Abraham was married to his half-sister.

A fusion of beauty, intelligence and a sense of judgment

Abigail’s personality was a combination of beauty, intelligence and a good sense of judgement. “She was a woman of good understanding, and of a beautiful countenance:” (1Sam. 25:3). A woman of good understanding, the Hebrew word *bof* (*tov*) in its root form means to be good, be pleasing, to be lovely, (Ps. 125:4). As an adjective, it means good, pleasant, beautiful, excellent et cetera. An important meaning of the term is moral goodness, as contrasted with moral evil (1Kgs. 8:36).^{xiii} Here King Solomon prayed that, God should teach the Israelites good ways, that is, good behavior, a sense of judgment. Moral goodness in this context has to do with her character, decency, kindness, honesty and qualitative life. The biblical description fits her well as a beautiful person with superior thoughtful acumen.

Ekanem observes that there is a deliberate contrast between the wife and the husband. Nabal is a ‘fool’ as his name suggests while Abigail is discerned as beautiful. She was a woman of good understanding; this was demonstrated in her wise action and counsel to David. Accordingly “wisdom is not so much the possession of knowledge as it is a practical ability that we put to good use in our daily living. Abigail was gifted in applying such wisdom in her life.”^{xiv} Abigail’s quick action and her words reveal both a special intelligence and wisdom. She succeeded in turning David from his plan and so impressed him that when Nabal died of possibly stroke a few days later, David hurriedly married Abigail.

Abigail had a sense of judgment, when she was told the act of her husband towards David and his men. She knew there was danger therefore in (v18) she gathered the provisions that seem to be the bone of contention between David and the house of Nabal. Instead of appealing to David

ordinarily without anything rather it was with a double portion of it, just for his servants, “let it even be given unto the young men that follow my Lord” (v27b). Abigail was wise, decisive and had great interpersonal skills that were able to diffuse David’s anger and help him reconsider the consequences of his hasty intentions of bloodshed. The Richards oblige that, Abigail seemed intuitive to realise that David was a complex individual and she shaped her appeal to fit not only David’s political goals but also his moral commitment. They reiterated that, Abigail appealed to what was best in David’s character.^{xv} By her judgment, she helped him retain his self-respect and the respect of his men.

Humble and approachable

Abigail is a woman of humane personality and such attitude earned her victory over the arching problems that were outrageous over and against the family. We were told that one of the servants told Abigail his mistress of the eminent danger that awaits the family if nothing was done concerning the insult raged on David and his men. The question is why did the servant feel that he could go to Abigail privately? It is because she was humble and approachable. And as a way of life Olujinmi and Jegede advice that servants should be treated as people with intellect not as slaves because, “We learn from her (Abigail) that life saving information from people in lower ranks may become lifesavers, if not neglected.”^{xvi} Abigail saved her home because she listened to the sayings of a servant. The Hebrew Scriptures described Nabal as a wealthy man, thus his wife was also wealthy. But we were told she was humble enough to pay attention to her servant’s message and bidding. She hurriedly went out with the provisions to meet David; she dismounted from her donkey and bowed before him as an act of respect.

And in 1Samuel 25:24b, she called him lord, the Hebrew word /d)a` (adon) from an unusual root means to rule; sovereign, controller either human or divine, lord, master or owner. In the Ugaritic and Akkadian cognate words carry the meaning of “lord,” “father,” and “mighty” when used to refer to man, it was a term of respect. Sarah called her husband by this title, (Gen.18:12) Pharaoh was referred to by this title (Gen.40:1). Ruth called Boaz by this term before they were married (Ruth 2:13). As a divine name it appears 439 times in an intense plural form yn`d)a& (adonay), the plural which may refer to the plural of majesty of God. Later the word became substitute for the proper name of Jehovah (YHWH). Abigail’s act of bowing down to David was a sign of respect; this very abject obedience may have been grounded on her belief in David’s future kingship, or it may simply mark the inferior position held by women in those days. Her whole address was couched in very humble terms; as a result, humility was the tool that gave her victory.

Provider of peace and home-keeping

Every woman is a home-maker and she is called to affect every man within her sphere in the fashion of providing peace and to make the environment attractive. Abigail's comely disposition in the conversation or appeal to David changed the tempo of his preconceived plan of destruction. She used her feminine prowess of first seeing herself as a woman who lost sight of her jurisdiction and her husband who is a fool by name and in action. She said: "upon me let this iniquity be... regard not this man... even Nabal: for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name and folly is with him: but I thine handmaid saw not the young men of my lord, whom thou didst send" (1Sam. 25:24-25). Although David was not a member of her household, she did a little housekeeping with him. She politely reminded him that he had a call on his life much greater than the attention this situation was getting. He should preserve his wrath for more important battles, staying focused on God's plan for his life and not adding needless bloodshed to his credit. Abigail believed in his destiny, so much so that she asked him to remember her when the Lord brought him into success. David was quick to tell her that if it had not been for her, every male belonging to Nabal would have been dead by daybreak. But for her sake, his anger was assuaged, that is the power of dialogue. The act of using dialogue in solving inter-family and communal crises is becoming farfetched.

Inter-communal crises in Gokana Ogoni land

The Gokana people of the Ogoni tribe are made of seventeen villages, they are said to have been the sons of Gberesaako. But as nature would have it, once distant communities have become close neighbours in this era because of expansion of the towns and territories. In the generations of the forefathers communities were not separated by mapped out boundaries for fear of encroachment, rather, lands were given freely to neighbouring villages and refugees were also accommodated and treated as brethren. Hence in Gokana, you can find members of one community in another town. With the upsurge of civilization and industrialization communities that one's released their landed space to others want it back for community use. And because such a landed gift had been owned by the recipients of old and had been handed down to the modern owners, it becomes difficult for any individual to release such a gift. This is the crux of communal crises in Gokana.

Presently there is war between Nwebiara and Barako communities of Gokana Ogoni. Barako community is out to reclaim the portion of land that was given to the people of Nwebiara by their forefathers. The said landed areas have been with the later for the past one hundred years. The Nwebiara community is fully established where they are, therefore they deem it

unnecessary to secede, rather, they are ready to fight, destroy and kill for what they see as their right to own. Legally the matter has been ruled by the Supreme Court of Nigeria in favour of the Barako community, ordering the Nwebira people to pull out of the land. However, it has yielded no result, the Nwebiara people have resolved that, they will not leave the area because, that has been the land of their birth and until the last person is wiped out of the town, there they will always be. Is there no wise woman or man in this place? There are but they may be devoid of the strategy.

The people of Deeyor and Deken of Gokana Ogoni are also fighting and killing each other. The landed property between the two communities has caused a nightmare to the people of Gokana. The Deeyor community claims ownership of the land insisting that their fore-parents gave the territory to Deken community. Therefore, they the Deeyor people will continue to cultivate those lands. On the other hand, the Deken people have also claimed ownership of same property, saying that they were first to inhabit the area and that the Deeyor people later inhabitants. The matter had lingered in the court for so many years; people are killed on daily basis in these farming areas from both sides randomly. There are planned attacks on villagers' right in the village. Travellers are been attacked and killed between and within these villages. The question is, are there no wise women or men to stop the menace? They exist, but maybe overtaking by the wrong attitude of people. We are going to look at few positive lessons from the story of Abigail for these scenarios.

Abigail's strategy in problem solving

Abigail acted wisely to save herself and her house by offering prudent counsel to David, thus she averted David's planned mayhem. From this story we can derive lessons that are relevant to the Nigerian women in the quest for peace in Nigeria. Peace is a situation or period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area. The idea and search for peace is as old as humanity. Since creation, human societies have been fraught with conflicting contradictions that have necessitated the desire for peace.^{xvii} As a result, the third parties have emerged as mediators with various strategies towards maintenance of peace. Such efforts have over the years found expression through anti-war sentiments and the development of peace movement or peace ideas. That led to the formation of the treaty of Versailles, the establishment of the League of Nations and the United Nations' Organization. The aims and objectives are outlined as thus:

We the people of the United Nations determine to serve succeeding generations from the scourge of war..... and to reaffirm fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of nations,

large and small, and to establish condition under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other source of international law can be maintained; and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in ease with one another as good neighbours and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security...^{xviii}

Thus peace keeping must be sacrosanct where ever human beings find themselves and it is always promulgated by humans not spirits.

Abigail's strategy was her ability to communicate: Communication seems to be one of the most important weapons of mobilization for peace and security. People can be convinced by a carefully planned and articulated speech that addresses the problem of peace and security. Not to always use legal means as is seen in the Ogoni communities, but in a round table where issues are trashed. This could be seen in Abigail's encounter with David. Olujinmi and Jegede see Abigail as a truce breaker and an astute communicator who used her feminine linguistic power to captivantly bring about an attitudinal change in David who had purposed in his mind and journey to destroy Nabal's household.^{xix} Abigail persuasively prevented David from avenging himself against Nabal his enemy. Her effort is worthy of emulation by world leaders, leaders in religious circles, couples and women in general and the society at large to promote peace and tranquility at levels.

Another strategy employed by Abigail in achieving peace for her household is her 'courage': Abigail was not just intelligent and beautiful, she was also brave. She was courageous. She understood that her husband's life and the lives of every man in her household were at stake. It would have been easy and even natural for fear to overtake Abigail in this setting, she might have been tempted to pack up and run for the hills—and who would have blamed her?^{xx} It would have provided an easy way out of a terrible marriage. Leaders must have the effrontery to withstand problems when they arise. If these Ogoni communities are courageous enough they would have been able to withstand the problems and provide solution to them. But Abigail was no quitter; she faced the oncoming disaster decisively and without apparent fear. It takes courage to face today's changing culture and the challenges those changes bring. Fear paralyses, courage moves forward. To see what needs to be done and to move ahead regardless of the cost or the consequences is an attribute that is desperately needed in the society today. The combination of courage and wisdom is a rare and valuable commodity.

Abigail was not just intelligent and beautiful, she was also brave. It would have been no mean feat to confront David and four hundred of his men who had been insulted and were intent on revenge with their swords. Yet Abigail approached David and, with great diplomacy, humbly offered him a “peace offering”. She gave David and his men plenty of food. Her quick actions saved her household from disaster and she kept David and his men from unnecessary bloodshed.

A third strategy is that of humility and intercession: Abigail bridged the gap between her family and David. She took responsibility for the problem and asked David to forgive her personally. She realistically acknowledged that her husband was as senseless as his name implied; perhaps suggesting that it would be beneath David’s dignity to chastise such a man. Communities and those who are in-charge could bring peace if humility is applied. They can also bridge the gap by giving their lives to solve the problem. Abigail’s wisdom permeates through over and over again in this story. Her decision to wait for the right moment to inform Nabal of her actions demonstrates wisdom and great restraint. When Abigail comes home from this intense interaction with David, she finds her husband in full party mode and drunk. She very wisely chose to wait until he was sober to inform him of how close he came to death. True wisdom is rare these days. “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peace makers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:17-18) Abigail demonstrates this kind of wisdom with every word and action.

Abigail was submissive: when she approached David, she honored him. Guzik calls this “sweetly speaking submission”. The scripture says that she bowed down before him. She acknowledges David’s reputation as a great leader, a future king and one who honors God in everything he does. Her words are not flattery, but sincere praise for a man whose deeds are legendary throughout Israel. Through her words and actions, she reminds him of his position, his character and his obligation to lead with integrity. Her humility and courage calls David to a higher level of thinking and action, one more consistent with his own values.

Submission is possibly the most important ingredient that cannot be taken away from the story of Abigail. The concept of Biblical submission is one of the most misunderstood teachings of the church. Abigail demonstrates what true submission looks like and what it does not look like. Some might challenge Abigail’s words and actions as being disrespectful to her husband. However, a close examination of this situation and the resulting actions speak otherwise. Abigail knew her husband was a fool. Her confession to David at the start of that interaction was not so much a statement of

disrespect about Nabal as it is a statement of the facts as everyone knew them. Her words showed her submission to a higher authority God. The declaration of Nabal's obvious character was not intended to disrespect her husband, but to bring David to his senses. Killing Nabal and all the men in the household would cause David to commit the sin of murder. The fact that her actions were intended to save the life of her husband demonstrates honor, not dishonor. Sometimes it must be said the way it appears. And it is advisably for women who are married to Kings and Chiefs to act in a direction they could convince their husbands in doing what is right.

Abigail as model for people in crises turned areas in Nigeria

Nigeria is a multi-tribal nation with diverse cultures that has to do with the peculiarity of a group of people. There are thousands of geographical and social boundaries that separate people of different domains. But that notwithstanding, the people in this areas must live in peace. Abigail is a model on how people can restore peace in their towns and villages.

Abigail understood her political environment: Every woman or man must understudy as well as understand her/his immediate political environs. This was the key to Abigail's victory; she suggested to David that killing Nabal would be unwise politically. She caused David to view the future to the time when the Lord would make him "ruler over Israel" (v. 30). She encouraged him to hold back now so that then, the act will not be a scar on him. Today among the Ogoni people there are lots of scars and unforgiveness because those who were supposed to do so failed. The Ogonis forgot that, they were politically and tribally one, therefore injury to one is injury to all. The people who propelled the killings of the four and nineteen Ogoni prominent sons were not like Abigail. Abigail stopped David from killing God's people he will later lead.

Abigail sides David: Abigail agreed that the way David had been treated by her husband was iniquitous, even though she was not told of the young men's request (v. 25). She counted her failures and acknowledged that David was right. She dealt with the personal affront that had so angered David. One of the failures of people in most of the internal crisis in Ogoni land is that, no one acknowledges the evil perpetrated by individual families or communities. Rather, it is favoritism and to concede self-righteousness.

Abigail met David's request: the food that Abigail brought with her is a sign that, she agreed to the fact that, David's original request was justified. She did not rely on words alone to convey her message but added actions to her words. Most times, the person who is seen as an enemy is right and like Abigail the request of such a person or people should be considered for peace to be restored. Most community wrangling is based on lack of justifying the truth in the quest of the 'enemy'. How justifiable is the quest

for a community to vacate an area they have lived hundreds of years ago? It is a matter of justifying the so called enemy. Nevertheless Abigail did just that.

Conclusion

Abigail is one of the notable women in the Old Testament. She was wise, decisive, had great interpersonal skills, and was not only able to diffuse David's anger, but also was able to help him think through the consequences of his hastily conceived intentions. These qualities of hers have formed a pyramid of wisdom to readers of the Scriptures. The writers once spoke with one of the Kings and his wife about the issue of letting the landed property alone with the other community to restore peace in the area and to prevent calamity for the living and unborn children. His reply was, 'they must leave the area; he will use bulldozers to bring everything down, human being and houses inclusive.' That King is having wives and chiefs, women and men, but there is no wise person like Abigail. If all wives and husbands can envisage peace in the face of trouble and set out modalities for such; then inter-tribal and inter-community wars and family issues will cease for peace to reign in Nigeria.

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