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Charitable like Abigail: The History of an Epitaph

ELISHEVA BAUMGARTEN

Here a *woman of valor* (Prov 31.10) is buried.
Charitable like Abigail,
She saw her business thrive.
She was modest like Deborah;
All her deeds were pleasant.
All glorious is the King's daughter within the palace. (Ps 45.14)
All her days she walked on the path of righteousness,
She observed the commandments day and night.
She went to synagogue and prayed earnestly.¹

THESE LINES CONSTITUTE one of a group of fairly common formulae that appear on the tombstones of Jewish women in early modern and modern Germany.² (See figures 3 and 4.) Using phrases from the

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1. This formula appears on many tombstones from Germany, entirely or in select portions (the opening or closing lines). I have collected only a small fraction of them as I document here. See figures 3 and 4 for examples.

2. For a discussion of gravestone inscriptions, see Rachel L. Greenblatt, *To Tell Their Children: Jewish Communal Memory in Early Modern Prague* (Stanford, Calif., 2014), 47–82. I look forward to the forthcoming publication of Michael Brocke's research on German cemeteries, some of which is already documented on the website of the Steinheim Institute: <http://www.steinheim-institut.de/cgi>

“woman of valor” (*eshet ḥayil*, Prov 31), among other biblical references, these memorials praise the deceased and her pious actions.⁵ This essay examines the opening lines of this inscription and similar epitaphs that mention the biblical figure Abigail, wife first of Nabal the Carmelite, and then of King David: “Charitable like Abigail.” How did she become a model for charitable giving?⁴ This association is not evident from the biblical narrative or early rabbinic writings; rather it developed in medieval Germany and gained currency in early modern Germany as a stock element of epitaphs for women. Through analysis of depictions of Abigail, starting with the Bible and continuing with rabbinic writings from late antique to medieval and early modern German interpretations, I posit that the selection of Abigail as a model served to ease the social and religious tensions concerning women’s charity that arose in response to changing gender and rabbinic norms during the Middle Ages, and that, subsequently, she became a prototype for charitable women. Despite certain gaps in this trajectory, I map out the development of this representation of Abigail by piecing together the extant sources. In closing, I reflect on the use of biblical figures as role models and how these postbiblical retellings reveal otherwise unarticulated social norms.

BEAUTIFUL AND INTELLIGENT OR DEVIOS AND
CALCULATING? FROM THE BIBLE TO LATE ANTIQUITY

Abigail is the only woman described in the Bible as both beautiful and intelligent.⁵ She is introduced in 1 Samuel 25 at the point when David,

-bin/epidat. See Brocke and Müller, *Haus des Lebens* (Leipzig, 2001), esp. p. 76, for mention of Abigail. For a detailed study of medieval tombstones, see the recent volumes about grave markers in Würzburg: Karl-Heinz Müller, Simon Schwarzfuchs and Rami Reiner, *Die Grabsteine vom jüdischen Friedhof in Würzburg aus der Zeit vor dem Schwarzen Tod (1147–1546)* (Würzburg, 2011), where there is no mention of Abigail.

3. Verses from Proverbs 31 were included in a wide variety of common formulae for women in the early modern period.

4. Leor Jacobi has suggested to me that perhaps the phrase *‘asta tzedaka* (she gave charity) derives from *la’aoṭ tzedakah u-mishpat* (to do what is just and right, Gen 18.19). To the best of my knowledge, this phrase does not appear on epitaphs, but it is worth mentioning that it is repeated numerous times in the Bible. See, for example, 2 Sam 8.15; Jer 9.23; Jer 22.3; Jer 23.15; Jer 33.15; Ez 18.19; Prov 21.3.

5. 1 Sam 25.2. For a discussion of *tovat sebbel*, a phrase translated as “intelligent” in the modern JPS translation, see Johannes F. van Rensburg, “Intellect and/or Beauty: A Portrait of Women in the Old Testament and Extra Biblical Literature,” *Journal for Semiotics* 11 (2002): 112–17. As Sarah Ben-Reuven has noted, three women are described as in the Bible as wise: the wise woman from Teko’a; the wise woman from Bet Ma’akhah; and Abigail. All three prevented

having been anointed by Samuel, is on the run from Saul. David demands a “protection fee” of sorts from Abigail’s husband, Nabal, in return for guarding his herd, but Nabal, who is described as “a hard man and an evil doer,” refuses. After being informed of this exchange by a servant, Abigail gathers a vast store of food, which she covertly delivers to David. During their encounter, Abigail begs David to spare her husband’s life, predicts David’s future success, and asks him to remember her once his reign is secured. Nabal subsequently dies a sudden (but natural) death, and the chapter ends with David summoning Abigail to become his wife.⁶ The biblical text makes no mention of Abigail after this sequence of events with the exception of noting her offspring, and her son Chileab is spoken of unremarkably.⁷

Abigail is depicted in positive if not effusive terms. That said, the Bible does not present Abigail as performing acts of charity; rather, she is portrayed as acceding to David’s petition by supplying food. Relative to this favorable biblical presentation, retellings from Late Antiquity cast a more ambivalent light on Abigail’s character. The most relevant texts appear in a number of passages in the Talmud and midrash, although Josephus includes Abigail and David’s meeting in his *Antiquities* as well.⁸ Midrashic

bloodshed. See Ben-Reuven, “David ben Avigail ve-BatSheva” *Beit Mikra* 27 (1982): 244–45. See also Irmtraud Fischer, “Abigajil: Weisheit und Prophetie in einer Person vereint,” in *Auf den Spuren der schriftgelehrten Weisen: Festschrift für Johannes Marböck anlässlich seiner Emeritierung*, ed. I. Fischer, U. Rapp, and J. Schiller (Berlin, 2003), 45–61.

6. For literature analyzing Abigail’s figure in the Bible, see Alice Bach, “The Pleasure of Her Text,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 43 (1989): 41–58; Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in the Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge, 1997); Moshe Garsiel, “Wit, Words and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Y. Raddai and A. Brenner (Sheffield, 1990), 161–68; Brigitte Donnet-Guez, “Modernité et indépendance d’Abigail dans la littérature biblique (1 Sam 25) et post biblique,” *Tsafon* 54 (2007–8): 29–48; Chaya Shraga Ben-Ayun, *David’s Wives—Michal, Abigail, Bathsheba* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 2005), 87–158, esp. 137–57.

7. 2 Sam 3.3; 1 Chr 3.1. Late antique and medieval commentators alike viewed this son, Chileab, as especially righteous. See *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* A, Hosafa B, chap. 2; bBer 4a, Rashi s.v. *mekhalim pne Mefiboshet*. Rashi’s commentary on 2 Sam 3.3 and 1 Chr 3.1 attributed the reference in Prov 23.15, “My son, if your mind gets wisdom,” to Chileab.

8. In her analysis of Josephus’s treatment of Abigail, Athalya Brenner argued that Josephus significantly reduced Abigail’s role in this narrative, namely, by abbreviating her speech, “Are We Amused? Small and Big Differences in Josephus’ Re-Presentations of Biblical Female Figures in Jewish Antiquities 1–8,” in *Are We Amused? Humor about Women in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Brenner (London, 2004), 90–106. See also Christopher T. Begg, “Abigail (1 Sam 25) According to Josephus,” *Estudios Bíblicos* 54 (1996): 5–34. More recently, Michael Avioz has

material presents Abigail as morally sound, at least with regard to her union with David. One midrash emphasizes that she conceived three months after Nabal's death (following the restrictions for widows in Jewish law, who are not permitted to remarry within the first three months after a husband's death) and suggests that her son's name Chileab, meaning "he resembles his father," supports this view.⁹ The most significant mention of Abigail in rabbinic sources from Late Antiquity appears in *bMegilab*, where she is listed as one of the seven female prophets.¹⁰ Each woman prophet's name is accompanied by the textual proof for that designation.¹¹ This passage tells how Abigail, as prophet, foresaw both her husband's death and David's reign as king. This corresponds with early Christian tradition, where the name "Abigail" is interpreted as "one whose father rejoiced in her"—due to her prophetic acumen.¹²

Yet the Talmud also describes Abigail in a more ambiguous light. A fresh interpretation of the biblical verse "And so it was, as she rode her ass and came down by the covert (*seter*) of the mountain" (1 Sam 25.20) focuses on Abigail's journey from her husband's house to deliver food to David's camp:

It should say "from the mountain." Rabbah b. Samuel said: This means that she came in reference to the blood that came from her hidden parts (*setarim*). She brought blood and showed it to him.¹³

argued against this assessment, "Josephus' Retelling of the Story of David, Nabal, and Abigail (1 Sam. 2)," in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 9, ed. M. Garsiel et al. (Hebrew; Ramat Gan, 2011), 135–56. In any case, Josephus's writings were not included in the corpus available to medieval Jewish scholars.

9. Tanḥuma, ed. H. Zundel (Jerusalem, 1969), Toldot 6, 35.

10. *bMeg* 14b; some parallel passages to this discussion can be found in *ySan*, chap. 2.

11. Judith Baskin has recently discussed these passages; see "Erotic Subversion: Undermining Female Agency in *bMegillah* 10b–17a," in *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. T. Ilan (Tübingen, 2007), 227–44. See also Daniel Bodi, "Was Abigail a Scarlet Woman? A Point of Rabbinic Exegesis in Light of Comparative Material," in *Stimulation from Leiden: Collected Communications to the XVIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament* (Leiden, 2004); *Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des Antiken Judentums* 54 (Frankfurt, 2006), 67–73; Yael Levine Katz, "Seven Prophetesses and Seven Sefirot: A Consideration of Kabbalistic Interpretation" (Hebrew), *Da'at* 44 (2000): 123–30.

12. Jerome, along with most late antique Christian commentators, ascribed the meaning *patrii mei exultatio* to the name "Abigail." S. Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis, *PL* 23, *Liber de nominibus*, col. 811.

13. This quoted passage, like those that follow, is from *bMeg* 14b. I have followed the Soncino translation, at times making small emendments.

Abigail is then depicted as engaged in a battle of wits with David after having defied her husband's orders. She presents David with menstrual blood, asking for his ruling on whether it renders her ritually impure (*nidah*).

He said to her: "Should blood be shown at night?" She replied: "Are capital cases tried at night?" He said to her: "He [Nabal] is a rebel against the king and no trial is required for him." She replied: "Saul is still alive and your fame has not yet spread through the world."

Here Abigail demonstrates the intelligence attributed to her in the Bible. She raises the fraught topic of menstrual blood in her conversation with David, one that may be considered inappropriate for a married woman to discuss with a stranger, although King David is reputed as an authority on menstrual purity elsewhere in the Talmud.¹⁴ This interaction leads David to recognize that he cannot kill Nabal without having blood on his hands.¹⁵ With this exegetical reading, the Talmud fills in the lines between the biblical verses, providing the background for David's pronouncement: "Then he said to her, 'Blessed be thy discretion and blessed be thou, thou hast kept me this day from blood guilt (*damim*)'" (1 Sam 25.33). The talmudic interpretation continues:

The term *damim* (bloodguilt) is in the plural form, to indicate two types of blood. This passage teaches that she bared her thigh and he traveled three parasangs by its light (out of desire for her).

The Talmud concludes this point by explaining the remainder of David and Abigail's biblical conversation. The sight of Abigail with her thigh bared tempted David to such an extent that he was drawn through space by the power of that sexual attraction:¹⁶

"Listen to me." She replied: "Let **this** not be a stumbling block for you" (1 Sam 25.31). The word "this" implies that something else would be, and so it was eventually. Meaning what? The incident with Bathsheba that came to pass.

14. See for example, b'AZ 24b. I thank Judah Galinsky for bringing this to my attention.

15. See Uriel Simon, "*Seek Peace and Pursue It*": *Topical Issues in the Light of the Bible, the Bible in the Light of Topical Issues* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 2002), 177–217.

16. Bodi, "Scarlet Woman," 67–73.

The Talmud suggests that Abigail resisted David's sexual overtures and warned him against making the mistake with her that he would commit in the future, for as a prophet she predicted his sin with Bathsheba.¹⁷ Thus she counseled him to avoid adultery through overcoming his attraction to her.

While this portrayal can be read as a tribute to Abigail's wisdom, it is not altogether complimentary: as a married woman who tries to entice David and discusses discreet matters related to menstrual blood with him, albeit for a just end, she falls short of her untarnished depiction in the Bible. Moreover, even if these verbal exchanges and the sexual temptation should be read as evidence of her wisdom and prophetic abilities, the talmudic conclusion concerning this encounter is undeniably pejorative:

Upon leaving, she said to him: "And when the Lord has prospered, my lord, remember your maid" (1 Sam 25.31). R. Nahman said: "This bears out the popular saying, 'While a woman talks, she spins.'" Some adduce the adage: "The goose stoops as it walks along, but its eyes see far and wide." (bMeg 14ab)

Here Abigail's request that David remember her when he becomes successful is interpreted as a negative comment on women who look out for their own interests, scheming for a future spouse while still married, much as geese gaze sideways while walking in a straight line.¹⁸ Overall, this is not an especially positive portrayal of Abigail, despite the credit she receives for wisdom and foresight.

FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

The gaonic midrash on the biblical prophetic books, *Midrash Shmuel*, cites the Talmud verbatim and goes further, explaining that Abigail's name appears with a shortened spelling in 1 Sam 25.32 (Abigal rather than Abigail) because she set her sights on David while she was still married to Nabal.¹⁹ A more positive view of Abigail is presented in *Midrash Sholhetov*, a midrashic collection on Psalms that has been dated to the gaonic period (at the earliest) but which was copied in medieval Ashkenaz, so

17. Modern scholars as well as ancient exegetes built on this comparison between Abigail and Bathsheba; see Heather A. McKay, "Eshet Hayil or Ishah Zarah: Jewish Readings of Abigail and Bathsheba, Both Ancient and Modern," in *Jewish Ways of Reading the Bible*, ed. G. J. Brooke (Manchester, 2000), 265–79, and the literature noted there; Ben-Ayun, *David's Wives*, 137–44.

18. Baskin, "Erotic Subversion," 227–44.

19. See *Midrash Shmuel*, ed. B. Lifshitz (Jerusalem, 2009), 78, lines 115–30.

parts of it may actually reflect that later period.²⁰ In this source, Abigail is praised as an exemplar of a good wife who increases her husband's spiritual well-being. That is to say, David's redemption from sin stemmed from her advice, as an explanation of the word *mabalat* (in Psalm 53) states:

Abigail was better for David than any sacrifice in the world (could have been), for if he had behaved toward Nabal as he had intended, all the sacrifices in the world could not have atoned for his deed; rather she came and redeemed him.²¹

This exegete is playing with the Hebrew root *m-b-l* (meaning “to forgive” or “to condone”) to explain that Abigail's deeds helped David to avoid sin. This favorable assessment of Abigail's character can be seen as a foreshadowing of how her image would be assessed by Ashkenazic scholars—exegetes and halakhic authorities alike—if not by medieval culture as a whole.

Turning our focus to medieval Ashkenaz, we find that Abigail is seldom mentioned in biblical commentaries; however, those biblical and talmudic commentaries that do discuss Abigail express a view of her character that diverges from the position typical in the Talmud. Joseph Kara (ca. 1100) stated that Abigail was intelligent enough to mitigate the evil that Nabal carried out: “Because this woman was wise and clever in all areas, she knew how to repair whatever he ruined.”²² The tosafist commentary on tractate *Megilah*²³ responds to the talmudic assertion that Abigail played the seductress with David: “It is difficult to grasp how this righteous woman (*tsadikit* or *tsadeket*) might have acted thus.”²⁴ After the late twelfth century, Abigail and her deeds also appear in an additional context: halakhic discussions of the permissibility of accepting charity from women who act without their husbands' consent.

20. For the history of this composition, see the introduction in *Midrash Tebilim Shoher Tov*, ed. S. Buber (Warsaw, 1893), 3–9.

21. *Ibid.*, Psalm 53, 144–45.

22. Joseph Kara, 1 Sam 25.3, s.v. “and the woman was wise.” I have relied here on the Mikra'ot Gedolot ha-Keter edition, ed. M. Cohen (Hebrew; Ramat Gan, 1993), 9: 1 Sam 25.3. About Joseph Kara, see Avraham Grossman, *The Early Sages of France: Their Lives, Leadership, and Works* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1995), 254–55, 311–18.

23. This commentary has been attributed to Judah Sirleon in early thirteenth-century Paris; and see Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Tosaphists: Their History, Writings, and Methods* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1980), 617–18.

24. Tosafot, bMeg 14b, s.v. *gilta sbokah*.

WOMEN, CHARITY, AND ABIGAIL

Halakhic deliberations on married women's agency with respect to charitable contributions, a topic that is usually appended to broader discussions of married women's financial independence, are central to understanding how medieval commentators portrayed Abigail.²⁵ In tractate *Bava kama*, the Babylonian Talmud permits women to unilaterally sell a "small amount" (*davar mu'at*) in business transactions. By extension, this logic is applied to charity collections from women: "Charity collectors may accept small items from them (women, minors, and slaves), but not large items." The Talmud continues with a story:

Ravina once came to the city of Maḥuza, and the housewives of Maḥuza came before him casting their chains and bracelets, which he accepted. Rabbah Tosfa'ah said to Ravina: "Is it not taught: 'charity collectors may accept small items from them (women, minors, and slaves), but not large items'?" He, however, said to him: "These objects are considered small amounts among the people of Maḥuza."²⁶

While also raising the issue of relative value, this talmudic vignette confirms the principle that married women had license to contribute only small amounts.

Hebrew texts from medieval Ashkenaz (primarily halakhic responsa, but also narratives and exempla) suggest that women were intensely involved in family finances.²⁷ Women were active participants in the mon-

25. Alyssa M. Gray, "Married Women and Tsedaqah in Medieval Jewish Law: Gender and the Discourse of Legal Obligation," *Jewish Law Association Studies* 17 (2007): 168–212. See also Mairi S. Katz, "'The Married Woman and Her Expense Account': A Study of Women's Ownership and Use of Marital Property in Jewish Law," *Jewish Law Annual* 13 (2000–2001): 101–41.

26. bBK 119a.

27. For a discussion of Jewish women's roles in the medieval economy, see William C. Jordan, "Jews on Top: Women and the Availability of Consumption Loans in Northern France in the Mid-Thirteenth Century," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 29 (1978): 39–57; Avraham Grossman, *Pious or Rebellious: Jewish Women in the Middle Ages* (Lebanon, N.H., 2004), 147–53; Victoria Hoyle, "The Bonds That Bind: Money Lending between Anglo-Jewish and Christian Women in the Plea Rolls of the Exchequer of the Jews, 1218–1280," *Journal of Medieval History* 34 (2008): 119–29; and in early modern Germany, Debra Kaplan, "'Because Our Wives Trade and Do Business with Our Goods': Gender, Work, and Jewish-Christian Relations," in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. E. Carlebach and J. J. Schachter (Leiden, 2011), 241–61.

etary exchange system and often made autonomous decisions.²⁸ Twelfth-century sources from Germany and northern France discuss women who engaged in business, both with family members and independently. Women are also mentioned as having engaged in trade as fully authorized proxies when their husbands were on the road and as having traveled beyond the bounds of their home cities for their own economic pursuits.²⁹

Some medieval scholars explicitly detailed the range of women's commerce, starting with Eliezer b. Nathan (Ra'avan; first half twelfth century), who wrote that women "give and take, lend and borrow, pay and are paid, deposit and receive money."³⁰ Most relevant for our inquiry, Ra'avan built on this reality and asserted that just as they took part in business without restraint, married women could freely give charity: "From women (as opposed to minors and slaves), they (charity collectors) take even large sums, for they act as their husbands' agents (*apotropsot*)."³¹ As such, Ra'avan articulated the character of his era. He acknowledged that the norms "in our time" (*ba'ida*) differed from those of previous generations, for women acted as partners in their husbands' businesses and were authorized in commercial and charitable matters. While it seems that everything they did was assumed to have been with the consent of their husbands, the sources indicate that some women had a remarkable degree of economic agency.³²

28. Women's participation in family businesses is attested in seventeenth-century Germany by the well-documented life of Glückel of Hamel. She was an active partner alongside her husband in their business until his death, when she took the lead role and supervised the sons and sons-in-law who became her business partners: see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 5–62; Chava Turniansky, "Introduction," *Glikl: Zikbronot, 1691–1719* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2008), 39–44. Even though Glückel's family appears to illustrate an early modern pattern of Jewish family business that stems from medieval customs, the degree of continuity represented by their example still requires verification.

29. Irving A. Agus, *The Heroic Age of Franco-German Jewry: The Jews of Germany and France of the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries, the Pioneers and Builders of Town-Life, Town-Government, and Institutions*, 2 vols. (New York, 1969), 1:256–419, contains sources that discuss economics and key roles held by women in business matters; Jordan, "Jews on Top," 39–56; Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 117–22; Gray, "Married Women."

30. Eliezer b. Nathan, *Sefer Even ha'ezer. Sefer Ra'avan* (Jerusalem, 1984), response #115, and idem, *Sefer Ra'avan*, Piske Bava kama, 191a.

31. Ibid., 191a, s.v. "but they take." And see Gray's discussion of these texts, "Married Women," 188–96.

32. For examples of women mentioned in narratives of persecution as women of means who excelled at business, one could note Marat Minna in the Crusade

In contrast to Ra'avan, numerous thirteenth-century rabbinic authorities stipulated that women could not conduct business or donate charity without their husbands' consent, and this became the prevailing opinion over time. Despite their knowledge of Ra'avan's teaching, those later rabbis did not quote his position. Rather than emphasize the distance in time and perspective between their era and Late Antiquity, those medieval authorities applied talmudic principles to their communities.³³ By way of illustration, in his *Sefer or zaru'a*, Isaac b. Moses repeated the talmudic instructions for receiving charity from married women verbatim, without acknowledging the more lenient practices of his own generation.³⁴ This approach is also found in Isaac of Corbeil's *Sefer mitzvot katan*, and from commentators on the *Semak*, including Peretz and Moses of Zurich, none of whom mention alternate positions or practices.³⁵

Meir b. Barukh of Rothenberg and some of his followers also restricted the scope of women's fiscal activities. Meir curbed the reach of Ra'avan's stance by ruling that a woman's independent financial conduct was limited to the monies and properties that she had owned prior to marriage. In *Sefer tashbets*, which is based on the teachings of Meir, Samson b. Tsadok also reformulated the talmudic principle, stating:

It is permissible to accept small amounts from a woman, but only if her husband is not strict with her. But if he (the charity collector) knows that her husband is strict with her, he may not collect at all.³⁶

Asher b. Yehiel (Rosh), one of Meir's pupils, asserted that he was ruling according to Meir when teaching that women could be business partners with their husbands, but if they hired tutors for their sons or gave charity

chronicles and Pulcellina of Blois in the Blois event. See Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 275; Susan E. Einbinder, "Pulcellina of Blois: Romantic Myths and Narrative Conventions," *Jewish History* 12 (1998): 21–46.

33. See, for example, MS Paris héb. 326 (IMHM 23495), fol. 71b, a collection of halakhot from the fourteenth century; Samson b. Tsadok, *Sefer tashbets* (Warsaw, 1901), #153; Asher b. Yehiel, *Shtet ha-Rosh*, #13, section 11. This is a more general phenomenon, relating to the role of the Talmud in thirteenth-century halakhic discourse. Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia, 2011), 121–81.

34. Isaac b. Moses, *Sefer or zaru'a*, *Piske Bava kama* (Zhitomir, 1862), 3: #468.

35. Ibid.; Moses of Coucy, *Semag* (Venice, 1547; repr. Jerusalem, 1961), *Aseh* #162; Isaac of Corbeil, *Sefer 'amude golab ha-nikra semak* (repr. Jerusalem, 1979), #247.

36. Samson b. Tsadok, *Sefer tashbets*, #153.

without their husbands' consent, neither their promises nor their obligations need be upheld.³⁷

These attempts to limit the agency by Jewish women can be placed in the broader framework of women's economic roles in medieval Europe, a topic that has recently been subject to considerable scholarly attention.³⁸ As the late medieval economy shifted from a family-based model to increasing reliance on the authority and prestige of the men in a given household, the activities assumed by and expected of women were altered. As Martha Howell recently asserted with regard to the period prior to the late thirteenth century:

Hence, this was "no golden age" of women's work if that is understood to mean that their work made women the approximate equals of men. Rather it was a moment in European history when the imperatives of the emergent market coincided, however unstably, with the imperatives of the patriarchal household.³⁹

The halakhic rhetoric from the late thirteenth century, which can also be explained by internal Jewish factors (such as a return to more stringent adherence to talmudic principles or a reevaluation of the difference between talmudic and medieval life),⁴⁰ reflects the transformations that were taking place in European urban economies in which Jews were participants.

This is the milieu in which discussions of the biblical Abigail were introduced, where women's fiscal responsibilities were debated and ultimately restructured. The biblical figure of Abigail is first mentioned in the context of married women's charity in *Sefer ḥasidim* (a work of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century).⁴¹ *Sefer ḥasidim*, whose authorship

37. Asher b. Yehiel, *Shut ha-Rosh*, ed. S. Yudelov (Jerusalem, 1994), Rule 13, #11.

38. Martha Howell, "The Gender of Europe's Commercial Economy, 1200–1700," *Gender and History* 20 (2008): 519–38, summarizes recent scholarship.

39. *Ibid.*, 522.

40. Fishman, *Becoming the People*, 147–54.

41. *Sefer ḥasidim* has been the topic of much research during the past century. For an overview, see Ivan G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden, 1981); Marcus, "Introduction," in *The Religious and Social Ideas of the Jewish Pietists in Medieval Germany: Collected Essays*, ed. Marcus (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1986) 11–24; Haym Soloveitchik, "Three Themes in the *Sefer Ḥasidim*," *AJS Review* 1 (1976): 311–58; and the collection of articles in *JQR* 96 (2006) written in response to Haym Soloveitchik, "Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: Sefer Ḥasidim I and the Influence of Ḥasidei Ashkenaz," *JQR* 92 (2002): 455–93.

is attributed to Judah the Pious (d. 1217), his father, and his disciple, Eleazar b. Judah of Worms (d. ca. 1230), discusses money that is declared part of a *herem* (a compulsory collection within the Jewish community) and rules that such money could be received from women, even if their husbands had forbidden such donations and had threatened physical abuse as a consequence:

[In the case of] a man who is strict (*kapdan*) and tells his wife: “Know that if you give any charity, I will hit you or harass you.” If the charity collector knows this goes against the husband’s wish, he should not accept even a small gift from her. However, if the community has declared that a certain amount must be given to charity and her husband ignores this ban, she should give and be blessed . . . As with David who took from Abigail even though it went against Nabal’s will for her to give [anything to] David, since he (Nabal) was an evildoer who did evil through his actions and his words. As such this corresponds to the spoils of enemies. And further, David did many favors for Nabal, which is why the lads told Abigail that it was as if she owed him.⁴²

The rhetorical strategy of this exemplum is quite complex. The first part refers to the talmudic ruling in bBK 119a (mentioned above), which confirms that charity collectors should not take money from a woman against her husband’s will. In contrast, the conclusion overrides the talmudic instructions, even at the price of risking abuse from her husband. Most interestingly, the story of Abigail, Nabal, and David is presented as the proof-text for this position. Just as David went against Nabal’s decision by accepting food from Abigail, so too charity collectors can go against a husband’s will, since a recalcitrant husband owes that money to communal charity. The discussion implies that charity of this sort was compulsory rather than voluntary,⁴³ analogous to Abigail and Nabal being indebted to David for his many favors to them. The Bologna edition of

42. For this analysis I have used the facsimile *Sefer ḥasidim* Parma H 3280, introduction by I. G. Marcus (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1985), and the earlier publication of *Das Buch der Frommen*, ed. J. Wistinetzki (Frankfurt, 1924), #1715. The Bologna edition was published in 1538. This story appears at #1051. All references to the Parma version are noted as *SHP*; all references to the Bologna version are noted as *SHB*.

43. Debra Kaplan discussed this distinction in “Coercion and the Communal Chest: Funding Early Modern Jewish Communities,” *44th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Chicago, Ill., December 16–18, 2012*.

Sefer ḥasidim substitutes the longer explanation by simply stating: “And David accepted from Abigail, etc.” evidence of a form of shorthand. The Bologna edition likely abbreviated the passage quoted above.

Moreover, this abridged version suggests that Abigail and David served as a code for an idea being conveyed in *Sefer ḥasidim*. An additional passage affirms this interpretation:

[In the case of] a son who knows that his father is so stingy that he refuses charity to the poor and [moreover] realizes that if he asked his father to contribute charity that he would not do so, [this son] may petition his father for a large sum of money [with the intention of] giving to the poor [himself]. If the father is wealthy and does not want to act justly, he will be convinced that he [his son] is taking it all for himself and contributing as if it came from his own funds. So too in the case of a wife vis-à-vis her husband: [*SHB* 315] if her husband is miserly but grants her an allowance to use at her own discretion, she should take what he gives her and give to charity. This is what Abigail did. She gave [a portion of Nabal’s bounty] to David.⁴⁴

Here a parallel is drawn between the strategies recommended for sons and wives, two categories of dependents featured in talmudic discussions of financial autonomy. In this case, *Sefer ḥasidim* suggests a maneuver that enables women to circumvent their husbands’ prohibition. Abigail is presented as an adept strategist who devised a way to donate provisions to David despite her husband’s refusal to do so.

As this application of the talmudic restriction on married women’s charity against their husbands’ wills shows, *Sefer ḥasidim* was written at a time when a return to talmudic directives was underway. This was a more general phenomenon that extended beyond matters of charity or gender.⁴⁵ In this environment, where legal authorities were making it increasingly difficult for married women to contribute money independently, the fig-

44. *SHP*, # 844 (= *SHB*, #315). I thank Ivan Marcus for providing me with drafts of his translations of these passages, which are the basis for the translations that appear here. I have altered his translations slightly.

45. The relation between halakhah and medieval life (sometimes dubbed “realia” in the scholarship) has been the subject of much research. See, for example, Israel M. Ta-Shma, “Halakha and Reality—The Tosafist Experience,” in *Rashi et la culture juive en France du Nord au moyen âge*, ed. G. Dahan and E. Nicolas (Paris, 1997), 315–29; Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Halakha and Metzuit (Realia) in Medieval Ashkenaz: Surveying the Parameters and Defining the Limits,” *Jewish Law Annual* 14 (2003): 193–224.

ure of Abigail is invoked as a model, allowing such women to contribute charity even without their husband's permission.

A responsum by Jacob b. Moses Moellin, (Maharil, 1365–1427) from late medieval Germany also invokes these halakhic portrayals of Abigail as a precedent for married women who chose to make independent charitable donations. Maharil was asked to rule on a case where the wife of a rich man gave money to charity; subsequently, it was claimed that those same funds represented an outstanding debt owed to creditors. In their accusation, the creditors argued that the money in question should never have been donated to charity since the woman's husband had not consented to her contribution.

In his deliberation, Maharil considers this case from several angles. He first raises the scenario of an elderly husband without sons, whose wife was tacitly operating as his deputy. However, Maharil concedes that in this particular case the wife gave money to charity in the absence of her husband's consent or despite his possible opposition to her actions. In order to reiterate his stance that women should seek their husbands' permission before dispensing funds, Maharil repeats the talmudic principle that women must secure their husbands' authorization before making charitable donations and notes that he routinely reminds women of this duty. Nevertheless, the overarching message indicates that Maharil opposes the return of these funds from the rabbi who received them for charity. He justifies the contribution from the woman in question as follows:

Even if, God forbid, this all transpired because he (the husband) has a heart like Nabal the Carmelite and she behaved like Abigail, she should be blessed.⁴⁶

Here we see Maharil returning to the justification in *Sefer ḥasidim* for married women who autonomously give charity, supported by the same biblical model. In this ruling, Maharil does not raise the possibility that the money in question might have been saved from the allowance that she received from her husband, effectively making them her funds. Rather, he constructs an argument that favored a woman's decision to give money against the express wishes of her husband, in the hope that he would eventually change his stance and approve of her decision.⁴⁷

46. Jacob b. Moses Moellin, *Shtetl Maharil ba-ḥadaṣot* (New Responsa of Rabbi Yaacov Mulin—Maharil), ed. Y. Satz (Jerusalem, 1977), #109.

47. See Gray's comments on this responsum, "Married Women," 202–7.

Maharil's fifteenth-century decision articulates a biblical interpretation closely aligned with twelfth- and thirteenth-century rabbis and expresses halakhic reasoning that echoes *Sefer ḥasidim*. Maharil also seems to imply that women are inherently more charitable than men, a notion that circulated in a number of medieval sources, as in this exemplum:

A certain righteous woman had a stingy husband who did not want to buy books or to contribute to charity. When her time to visit the ritual bath came, she had no interest in going. He said to her: "Why are you not immersing [so we can resume sexual intercourse]?" She said: "I will not immerse until you buy books and give charity." He did not want to do either. And so, she [continued to] refuse to immerse unless he conceded to buy books and give to charity. He complained to a sage, who told him: "She will be rewarded for compelling you to do a religious commandment, and she doesn't know another way to [persuade you]." The sage then said to the wife: "If you can find other ways to make him act righteously, you will have acted properly. But do not do it by using sex [for leverage]; this will only frustrate him, and he may start to contemplate sinning with other women. And by preventing yourself from getting pregnant, you will only incite him."⁴⁸

In this instance, the sage offers different counsel to husband and wife, an indication that a conflict of interests between upholding the husband's authority without refusing the woman's charity is at play here. The sage suggests that the wife is sending an appropriate message via the wrong tactic.⁴⁹ As in the cases that invoke Abigail, these passages stress that women should only make contributions to charity after having secured their husbands' permission while they urge husbands to allow such donations.

How did Abigail evolve into an example of a married woman who gave charity without her husband's consent? It is likely that thirteenth-century community leaders and charity collectors were reluctant to surrender charitable revenue that they regularly received from women during the twelfth century, as indicated in Ra'avan's comments, and so they sought a means to circumvent the talmudic injunction. Abigail was an ideal role

48. SHP #670; SHB #877.

49. Despite the distinction sometimes made between halakhists and figures such as Judah who is often referred to as a *hasid*, it is noteworthy that he too was a legal decisor (*posek*); and see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz* (Detroit, 2012), 44–45.

model since she, too, went against her husband's instructions when she gave food to David. In this way, a biblical precedent was used to trump the Talmud's more restrictive ruling.

Medieval Christian sources lend additional insight, pointing to a similar, though not identical, positive understanding of Abigail, and thus would have reinforced her transformation into a figure worth emulating. Among Christian interpretations, Bede's (known as St. Bede or Venerable Bede [Beda venerabilis]; d. 735, England) understanding of Abigail dominated most subsequent medieval Christian exegesis. Bede presented Abigail as a significant counterimage to Nabal, particularly in relation to David, who is understood to prefigure Jesus. In this reading, Abigail is portrayed as the "true synagogue" (*synagoga fidelis*), parallel to Jews who believed in Jesus rather than spurning him. While Bede and his followers did not develop the link between Abigail and charity, Bede made note of her righteousness, as did earlier Jewish and Christian commentators who explained that her father rejoiced in her deeds.⁵⁰

Although Abigail was not central in medieval Christian teachings, she appeared regularly in illustrated Bibles, where she is typically portrayed as an urban wife approaching King David, occasionally bearing gifts (as in figure 1). She is also portrayed as a precursor to the Virgin Mary in the popular German composition *Speculum humanae salvationis*, which in many cases is accompanied by illustrations.⁵¹ Her depiction (as in figure 2) as a stately matron (rather than a nun or other pious figure) lends authority to the Jewish understanding of Abigail's charitable actions as those befitting a righteous urban woman, although this attribute is not overtly communicated in the drawings or the texts that accompany

50. Beda Venerabilis, *In Samuelem propheta allegorica expositio*, PL 91 Liber IV, 0687d–0688a, "in operibus charitatis gloria praefulgidis, idem Pater exsultans affatur" (688d); and in later works: for example, Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in libros iv Regum*, PL 109, librum primum, XXV: col 64; Angelomus Luxonvensis, *Monachi errationes in libros Regum*, PL 115, Librum primum, XXV: col. 325; Rupertus Tuitiensis, *Opera omnia*, PL 168, Opus de gloria et honore filii hominis super Matthaeum, VII: col. 1452; Rupertus Tuitiensis, *Ad venerabilem ecclesiae*, PL 170, Liber secundus, VII, 39b; Godefridus Admontensis, *Homiliae dominicales*, PL 174, Homilia XLV, "de tempore paschali," col. 305; and the idea is echoed in Bernardus Clarvallensis, *Parabola*, PL 183, parabola IV, "de Christo et ecclesia," col. 767d. This is a preliminary list of texts that discuss Abigail. I list them here as they may be useful for future research.

51. Abigail appears in chapter 36. For a discussion of the editions and the illustrations, see *A Medieval Mirror: Speculum Humanae Salvationis, 1524–1500*, ed. A. Wilson and J. L. Wilson (Berkeley, Calif., 1985).



Figure 1. Folio from *Bible of St. Louis* (France, ca. 1250). Abigail as an urban matron. Picture reproduced with permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. MS M.638, fol. 33v. Purchased by J. P. Morgan (1867–1943) in 1916.

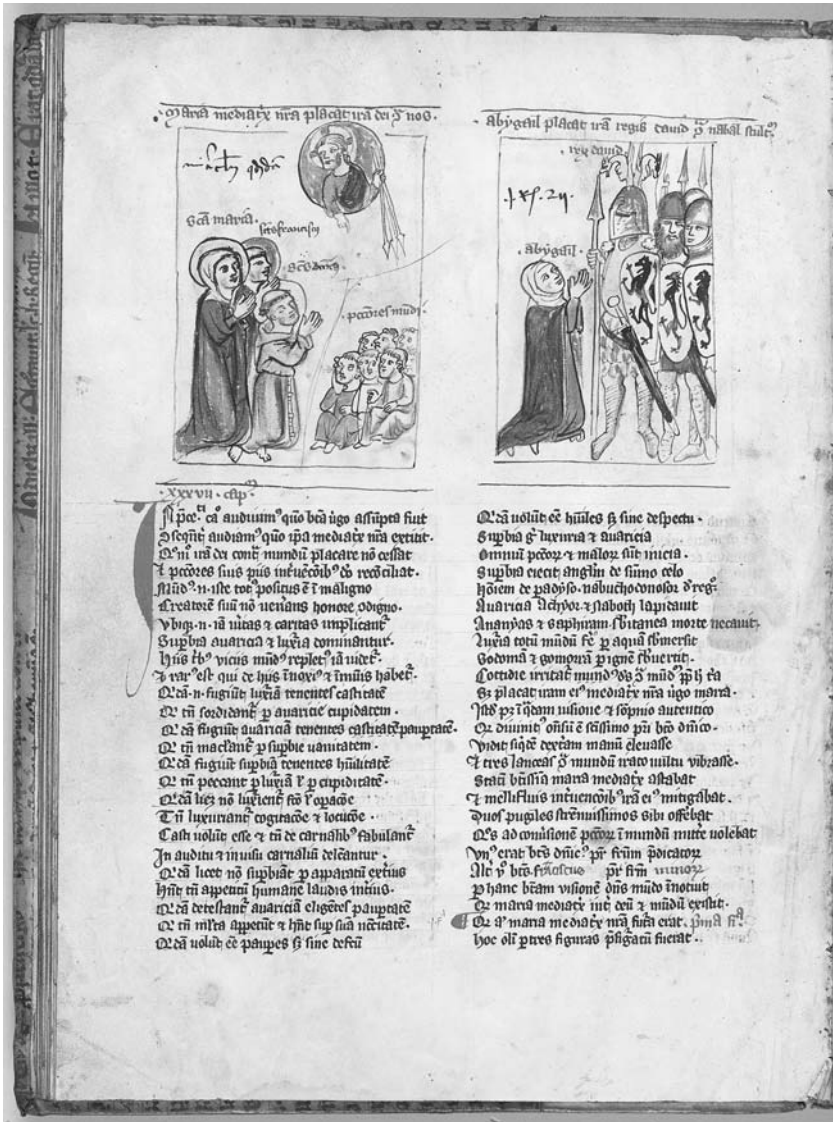


Figure 2. Abigail as urban matron in *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, Germany, late fourteenth century, probably Nürnberg. Reproduced with permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. MS M.140, fol. 39v. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) in 1902.

them.⁵² During the early modern period, Abigail gained tremendous popularity among Protestants, especially in Puritan circles, where she was viewed as a wise and industrious wife.⁵³ In his famous poem about twelve meritorious biblical women, *Der Ehren-Spiegel der Zwölf Durchleuchtigen Frauen des Alten Testaments*, first published in 1553, Hans Sachs depicted Abigail as having good sense (*Die Vernufftig*), a quality reflected in other contemporaneous works, including artistic images.⁵⁴

These Christian perspectives on Abigail do not directly correspond to the Jewish portrayals of her. However, they do resonate with two attributes from Jewish texts that were crucial to the Jewish reinterpretation of her character in the High Middle Ages: namely, presenting Abigail as a symbol of urban piety among married women, as seen above, and of accepting women's charity, even against their husbands' desires. This latter element can be detected in writings by rabbis and Christian clergy alike. Rabbinic support for women's donations, even against their husbands' will, is reminiscent of a thirteenth-century Christian phenomenon that Sharon Farmer has called "persuasive voices," a reference to Christian preachers and priests who strategically encouraged women to give charity, thus redeeming their husbands' souls.⁵⁵ As the Parisian authority Thomas of Chobham (ca. 1160–1236) argued in his manual for confessors:

If he is avaricious she should arouse generosity in him, she should secretly give alms from their common property, supplying the alms that he omits. For it is permissible for a woman to expend much of her husband's property, without his knowing in ways beneficial to him and for pious causes.⁵⁶

52. I thank Dr. Leon Jacobowitz Efron, who brought it to my attention that the colors that Abigail is wearing in figure 2 typified the attire worn by urban matrons in fourteenth-century Germany.

53. Gloria L. Main, "Naming Children in Early New England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (1996): 1–27; Laurel Ulrich Thatcher, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York, 1991), presents biblical women as female role models in colonial New England, focusing on Bathsheba, Jael, and Eve rather than Abigail.

54. Yvonne Bleyerveld, *Hoe bedrieftlijk dat die vrouwen zijn: Vrouwenlisten in de beeldende kunst in de Nederlanden circa 1550–1650* (Amsterdam, 2000), 180–84; 245–46; Bleyerveld, "Chaste, Obedient and Devout: Biblical Women as Patterns of Female Virtue in Netherlandish and German Graphic Art, ca. 1500–1750," *Simiolus: Netherland's Quarterly for the History of Art* 28 (2000–2001): 219–50.

55. Sharon Farmer, "Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," *Speculum* 61 (1986): 517–43.

56. *Ibid.*, 517.

Thomas concludes by stating: “Therefore this ought to be the first and foremost concern of the priest, that he instruct the wife in this way.” Caesarius of Heisterbach (1180–1240) expressed a similar idea regarding women’s willingness to give charity in an exemplum: “Priests are often accustomed to grant permission to wives to take money from miserly and uncharitable husbands and give it to the poor.”⁵⁷ As with rabbis, Christian confessors and leaders counseled the need for wifely obedience to their husbands’ authority, but they also observed that women contributed more readily; thus they were willing to accept wives’ donations in the hope that their husbands would change their minds. As did *Sefer ḥasidim* and Jacob Moellin, Christian clergy upheld patriarchal authority while providing a way to circumvent it, at least in the realm of charitable contributions.

FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO EARLY MODERN GERMANY

Whatever impetus may have prompted medieval rabbis in Ashkenaz to select Abigail as a model of charity, this image took on a life of its own. Following its trail requires a chronological leap, as little evidence is extant for the period between Jacob Moellin and the seventeenth century. While early modern halakhic authorities endorsed the talmudic principle that married women should limit themselves to modest donations,⁵⁸ the figure of Abigail as a symbol of all women who give charity (not only those who acted against or without their husbands’ permission) began to appear on memorial inscriptions, as noted at the beginning of this essay. An examination of the database of hundreds of medieval and modern tombstones from Germany assembled by Michael Brocke of the Steinheim Institute⁵⁹ reveals increasingly frequent mention of the biblical “woman of valor” (*esbet ḥayil*) on women’s tombstones during this period. Whereas the phrase “Here a woman of valor is buried” (*po temunah esbet ḥayil*) hardly appears on epitaphs from before the Black Death,⁶⁰ it

57. Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. J. Strange (Cologne, 1851), VI 5, 1:351; this story is discussed and translated in Peter Biller, “Popular Religion in the Middle Ages,” in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. M. Bentley (New York, 1987), 134.

58. Shlomo Luria (Poland 1510–73), *Yam shel Shlomo* (Jerusalem, 1996), Bava Kama 119a; Yehezkel Landau (Poland 1713–93), *Noda’ be-Yebuda Tanina* (New York, 1960), Yoreh De’ah, #158; Judah b. Israel Aszod (Hungary 1794–188?), *Shut Ya’aleh Yebuda* (New York, 1965), 2; *Even ha-’ezer, Hoshben Mishpat*, #43; *Kitsur Shulḥan ’arukh* (Ramat Gan, 1983), Yoreh de’ah, Hilkhot Tsedakah, # 447, 459.

59. See <http://www.steinheim-institut.de/cgi-bin/epidat>. A search using the phrase *esbet ḥayil* results in hundreds of examples.

60. It is noteworthy that this is the opening line of the poem Eleazar b. Judah, a disciple of Judah b. Samuel (the Pious), wrote when he mourned his wife

becomes a common feature of early modern tombstones, where most women are memorialized in reference to the proverbial woman of valor.⁶¹ A variety of formulae including references to Abigail can be found until the mid-nineteenth century, when references to Abigail vanish.⁶²

The tombstone of Dobrash, wife of Shlomo Oppenheim, from the early eighteenth century (1736) exemplifies this pattern:

The important old woman, Dobrash, wife of Shlomo Oppenheim. Here *a woman of valor* is buried. She gave charity like Abigail, *she perceives that her merchandise is profitable* (Prov 31), she was modest like Deborah, *her deeds were pleasant*.⁶³

Dolce, who was murdered. See Avraham M. Habermann, *Gezerot ashkenaz ve-tarfat* (Jerusalem, 1945), 165–67. The database records four cases of women called *esbet hayil* up until the early sixteenth century. So too in tombstones from Würzburg, only two women are noted as women of valor, #1255, #1297, both dated to 1281–1300. This is not to say the phrase was not found, but it was not as popular as in later centuries.

61. See <http://www.steinheim-institut.de/cgi-bin/epidat>, where most women's epitaphs include the phrase "woman of valor" with different formulae or without any other verses altogether.

62. The most recent epitaph that I found is dated from 1881. References to Abigail's charitable acts are found through the mid-nineteenth century. After that point, tombstone inscriptions mention Abigail's modesty without making associations to charity.

63. For a few examples, see Dobrash Bachrach, d. 1736, in Ludwig Lewysohn, *Nafshot tsadikim, sechzig Epitaphien von Grabstein des israelitischen Friedhofes zu Worms* (Frankfurt a. Main, 1855), #42, 79; Perl, wife of Jacob Hilb, 1777–1843, in *Der jüdische Friedhof Wankheim*, documented by Frowald Gil Hüttenmeister with Elke Maier and Jan Maier (Tübingen, 1995), stone #22, pp. 58–59; and Dauphine Hertz (née Cantor), d. 1852, in *Steine wie Seelen: Der alte jüdische Friedhof Krefeld Grabmale und Inschriften*, ed. M. Brocke and A. Pomeranz (Krefeld, 2003), 102. For a slightly different version of the formula following the mention of Abigail, Rösche Neukamp, d. 1848, in Michael Brocke, *Der jüdische Friedhof in Soest. Eine Dokumentation in Text und Bild* (Soest, 1993), 72. In this same collection an anonymous stone bears another variation on the formula, "here is a righteous and honest woman, charitable like Abigail and Sarah, her deeds were pleasant," *ibid.*, 76–77. See also Gitel bat Oppenheim, d. 1777; Sarah bat Leser Bückeberg, d. 1800; and Sarah bat Mordechai Halle, d. 1816, in Bernhard Gelderblom, *Die Juden von Hameln, von ihren Anfängen im 15. Jahrhundert bis zu ihrer Vernichtung durch das NS-Regime* (Holzminden, 2011), 210, 216, 218. In the same volume also see the tombstones of Jetta, wife of Abraham, d. 1820 (221), and Hannah bat Salomon, d. 1844 (226), where only a portion of the formula appears. In the Steinheim database the formula appears on tombstones from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries: Arolsen (1764, 3 examples from 1815–36); Bayreuth



Figure 3. Perl wife of Jacob Hilb, 1777–1843; in *Die jüdische Friedhof Wankheim*, documented by Frowald Gil Hüttenmeister with Elke Maier and Jan Maier (Tübingen, 1995), 58–59, no. 22. I thank Gil Hüttenmeister for permission to reproduce this photo.

The epitaph continues, emphasizing that Dobrash walked the righteous path and was modest as well as virtuous.

The four-syllable Hebrew pronunciation of Abigail (A-vi-ga-il) is advantageous for composing an epitaph that rhymes, since it matches *Eshet hayil*. However, this is not the only way in which this name was used. Well into the late nineteenth century, epitaphs including the phrase “charitable like Abigail” are preserved on numerous tombstones (see figures 3 and 4).⁶⁴ These inscriptions often refer to Deborah as modest

(1881); Bingen (7 examples from 1825–39); Blieskastel (1836); Bonn-Schwarzrheindorf (1754); Dillingen-Diefflen (1870); Haigerloch (1844); Hamburg (1723, 1769, 1782, 1789, 1806); Hamburg-Altona (1815), Hammerstein (1732); Heilbronn (1843); Homburg (1832); Ilingen (1847, 1851, 1852); Jüchen-Garzweiler (1821); Krefeld (1852); Linnich (1821); Mönchengladbach-Odenkirchen (1798); Roermond, Oude kerkhof (1843); Preußisch Oldendorf (1772); Regensburg (1879); Rütthen (1847); Schermbeck (1801); Schmalkalden (1744, 1750–55, 1799); Sonderhausen (1836).

64. Many epitaphs note the charity of the deceased without mention of Abigail, yet the association between her and charity is demonstrated over a long time frame and as such is significant.



Figure 4. Dauphine Hertz (née Cantor), d. 1852; in *Steine wie Seelen: Der alte jüdische Friedhof Krefeld Grabmale und Inschriften* (Krefeld, 2003), 102, photographed by Andreas Hemstege. I thank Natania Hüttenmeister for permission to reproduce this photo.

as well; some include the entire poem found on Dobrash Oppenheim's grave.⁶⁵

This evidence demonstrates the extent to which biblical women were cited as role models when charitable activities (and other actions) of female community members were memorialized. Another epitaph pattern offers similar praise to both Abigail and Esther, albeit without mention of charity: "Here is buried a woman of valor, like Esther and Abigail."⁶⁶ Rivka Tiktiner (d. 1605), author of a manual for young wives, *Meneket Rivka*, was praised with a comparison to Abigail on her tombstone:

*Many women have done well, but you surpass them all (Prov 31.29): Our heart trusted her (Prov 31.11), like Abigail whose merit protected her throughout her life.*⁶⁷

Abigail was also lauded as worthy of admiration and emulation in early seventeenth-century textual sources. In *Meneket Rivka*, Tiktiner provides an outstanding example of how biblical women were meant to guide the behavior of female readership.⁶⁸ Similarly, Moses Henochs Altschul-Jeruschalmi's *Brantspiegel* (Krakau, 1596) interweaves many biblical women into his moral teachings. Abigail features most significantly as the model of a good wife in the chapter on the reality of a righteous man (*tsadik*) married to evil wife or an evil man married to a pious wife, saying: "Like the hated Nabal who had Abigail and she was truly modest in all her deeds."⁶⁹ He goes on to explain this as the catalyst for David's words: "And blessed be your prudence" (1 Sam 25.32).⁷⁰ Thus, her image grew

65. While Dobrash was named Deborah, the other women whose tombstones are included this inscription show no commonality or link according to their variety of names.

66. *Mainz-Alter Friedhof*, ed. N. A. Heyeckhaus (Altendiez, 2008), southside #20952 (1709); Steinheim database: Schmalkden (1799); Haigerloch (1844); Bayreuth (1881).

67. Otto Muneles, ed., *Epitaphs from the Ancient Jewish Cemetery of Prague* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1998), #61, 161.

68. Although Abigail is not mentioned in this manual, the high level of familiarity and ready access to biblical references assumed by its author (of her female readers) is of great relevance for this study; see *Meneket Rivkab: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women by Rivkab bat Meir*, ed. F. von Rohden, trans. S. Spinner (Philadelphia, 2009).

69. "Es sich trifft das ain zadik hot ain böes weib. Un' der roscho ain vrumes di is ain grose znuo gewesen mit ire maasim," Moses Henochs Altschul-Jeruschalmi, *Brantspiegel*, ed. and trans. S. Riedel (Frankfurt a. Main, 1993), 70.

70. See also the portrayal of Abigail in *Sefer zekbirab*, a book of charms written in the seventeenth century, where she is depicted seated in the fifth sphere in heaven, leading other women in prayer, cited by Yemima Hovav, *Maidens Love Thee* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2009), 83.

from the prototype for women who were so intent on giving charity that they would do so even if it required defying their husbands' directives to the symbol of a virtuous matron, worthy of emulation in her charitable (and other) activities. A telling illustration of the popularity of this figure is articulated in the early sixteenth-century composition *Many Pious Women*, whose author states:

There are still many pious womenfolk whom I have not mentioned such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah the prophetess, and Abigail (may her name be remembered for good). I have left out these good women because their piety is known to children in their cradles. If I were to speak about their piety too, I would make a book that would be a load for a donkey to carry.⁷¹

BIBLICAL FIGURES AND CULTURAL HISTORY

This essay has followed the biblical figure of Abigail from an early modern epitaph to her biblical origins and back, focusing on medieval Ashkenaz, where halakhic deliberations and developments led to new understandings of her role. However, this change represents more than a mere heuristic use of her character by medieval rabbis at a time when guidelines concerning the collection of charity from married women were in flux; this fresh view of her character took on greater significance in a culture where Abigail became symbolic of all charitable and wise women.

The trajectory that the figure of Abigail followed results from both her biblical depiction and the social and cultural contexts that produced exegesis about her. The view of Abigail as a paragon of charity is unique to the Jews of medieval and early modern Germany, whereas other Jewish cultures debated the ambiguous legacy of talmudic interpretations of her character. For example, as Gilad Sasson has recently demonstrated, sixteenth-century Sephardic commentators struggled to reconcile the dissonance between the biblical and talmudic narratives of this story.⁷² However, in medieval Ashkenaz, the interpretative gap was a lesser issue; there, halakhists presented Abigail and her actions in a positive light, disregarding the negative attributes that were found in previous sources.

71. Harry Fox and Justin Jaron Lewis, ed. and trans., *Many Pious Women* (Berlin, 2011), 226.

72. Gilad Sasoon, "Apologetic Approaches to the Expanded Biblical Story about David and Abigail in the Responsa of Ridbaz and Ralbach" (Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 130 (2012): 29–60.

In this study, I have suggested that the image of Abigail was transformed into a role model that met a particular cultural need, one that was especially pressing for Ashkenazic rabbis during the High Middle Ages, when women's economic agency was undergoing significant curtailment and earlier legal guidelines were being reinterpreted. In this atmosphere, Abigail served as a convenient tool for redefining the forms of charity that women could contribute. While the circumstances and development of Abigail's image are distinct, some of their aspects are fairly conventional. It was not unusual for medieval rabbis to resort to biblical examples when precedents from the Talmud and other sources (considered preferable from a legal perspective) were inconclusive.⁷³ For example, halakhists cited verses from the Book of Joshua to instruct how members of one community should rule over another;⁷⁴ and, after 1096, the actions of the biblical patriarch Abraham were invoked to justify the killing of children during the First Crusade.⁷⁵ Thus, the practice of medieval authorities seeking out more suitable biblical support when later sources or lines of argumentation did not serve their purposes was hardly created for the case of women giving charity.

Yet, due to the tenor of extant sources, tracking the ways in which biblical personages are depicted in halakhic discourse is particularly useful for investigating women's roles in medieval Jewish society. The medieval Hebrew texts that have reached us were almost without exception written by men and intended for a male readership. As a result, matters that pertained to women's lives and practices were not necessarily discussed because they were outside the purview of these authors, with the issue of women and charity as a case in point. Medieval charitable practices have recently been discussed by a number of scholars. In his study of charity in documents from the Cairo Geniza, Mark Cohen has noted the difficulty of finding a mention of women at all, a challenge that

73. This is also true of medieval Christian scholars; see Pierre Riché and Guy Loubtrichon, eds., *Le Moyen Age et la Bible* (Paris, 1984); Raymund Kottje, *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testamentum auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters* (Bonn, 1964).

74. Haym Soloveitchik, *The Use of Responsa as Historical Source* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1990), 100–105. Soloveitchik indicates that this technique was commonly employed in eleventh-century halakhic literature.

75. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: The Legend and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as Sacrifice, The Akedah* (New York, 1967); Jeremy Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade* (Philadelphia, 2004).

is compounded by the social norm in Muslim culture against recording women's names, as a sign of respect for their modesty.⁷⁶ With regard to medieval Ashkenaz, sources that discuss charity are relatively scarce and, even more so, those that mention women.⁷⁷ This is why the invocations of Abigail in medieval conversations about charity are so valuable in revealing otherwise occluded practices and, more specifically, in demonstrating how references to biblical female figures can be a useful tool for illuminating medieval women and their lives. This is not to claim a consistent or direct correlation between the depiction of biblical role models and women's actual activities, but it offers an additional path of discovery.

The sources studied in this examination of Abigail offer no hint that women who gave charity called upon this biblical example to explain their actions; rather, it seems that medieval rabbis had pointed to her as a role model. However, once this image became well known and accepted, the biblical Abigail was associated with women and their charitable deeds. In early modern sources, writers who addressed female audiences frequently mention biblical examples.⁷⁸ Broadly speaking, this historical examination of the contextualization of a biblical figure not only highlights novel interpretations of the biblical narrative but also offers a more nuanced understanding of medieval and early modern culture. Medieval retellings of biblical texts reflect the practices and values of the interpreters' *Weltanschauung*. The rabbis' decision to rely on the Bible instead of the Talmud on a particular topic points to a path for innovation in other situations, as well. If this recasting of the story of Abigail is seen as one case among many, it highlights the tremendous richness of this cultural repertoire of reworking biblical narratives.⁷⁹ Medieval reinterpretations of the biblical story of Abigail and David in order to facilitate charitable

76. Mark R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), 139–55; Cohen, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages: An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), 83–90.

77. Gray, "Married Women," 204–5.

78. For two such examples, see *Meneket Rivka*, 2a, 81. Also see *Many Pious Women*.

79. See John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo to the Reformation* (New York, 2001), 222–53; Elisheva Baumgarten, "'Remember That Glorious Girl': Jephthah's Daughter in Medieval Culture," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97.2 (2007): 189–209, for an example of depictions and analyses of additional biblical figures portrayed in medieval culture.

giving by women are, therefore, an example of how halakhic exegeses could serve the values of the times. In this instance, these reinterpretations that were intended for a practical legal purpose led to the widespread cultural association of Abigail with charity that was expressed through the epitaphs of many early modern Jewish women.