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The Abishag Episode: Reexamining the Role of Virility in 1 Kings 1:1–4 in Light of the Kirta Epic and the Sumerian Tale “The Old Man and the Young Woman”

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Based on two pieces of parallel literature (the Sumerian folktale “The Old Man and the Young Woman” and the Kirta Epic), most modern interpreters have understood the Abishag Episode as a virility test that indicates David is unfit to rule. However, this article contends that this view is a misreading of the text based on a comparative method that fails to take into account important differences between 1 Kgs 1:1–4 and the parallel literature. Following Hallo’s contextual method, this article compares and contrasts these two texts with the Abishag Episode and demonstrates that the dissimilarities between the narratives make it unlikely that 1 Kgs 1:1–4 is truly about David’s sexual competence. The evidence presented here confirms that the Abishag Episode is concerned with David’s ability to rule, but the emphasis is on David’s inability to rule his kingdom effectively, which his servants attempt to address by reenergizing David with a beautiful young virgin.

Key Words: David, Abishag, 1 Kings, contextual method, Kirta Epic, Sumerian folktale

INTRODUCTION

1 Kings 1:1–4 records a curious incident in which David’s servants bring him a young woman to lie down with him because he is old and can no longer warm himself. The text states that the young woman was brought to David and served him, but that the king did not have sex with her (הַמֶּלֶךְ לֹא נָסַח). The text jumps from this episode into the narrative that relates how the crown prince, Adonijah, attempted to usurp the throne from his

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father, followed by Solomon's attempt to gain the throne with the help of Bathsheba and Nathan the prophet.¹

Many modern scholars argue that the narrative has strong sexual overtones that indicate David has failed some sort of virility test, but most of them fail to cite evidence for their reading of 1 Kgs 1:1–4.² The few who do provide evidence for their reading point to parallels with the Kirta Epic and the Sumerian folktale "The Old Man and the Young Woman."³ However, foregrounding the similarities between 1 Kgs 1:1–4 and the alleged parallel texts downplays any discussion about their dissimilarities. This leads to the question: is it possible that the distinctions between the texts are pushed to the margins precisely because they make a comparative approach problematic in the first place? This article proposes that 1 Kgs 1:1–4 is concerned not with David's sexual prowess but rather with his ability to judge his kingdom effectively. In order to demonstrate this thesis, this article will first contextualize the modern reading of 1 Kgs 1:1–4 by giving a brief overview of the passage's history of interpretation during the precritical and critical eras and then will compare and contrast the two ancient Near Eastern texts mentioned above with the Abishag Episode.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION⁴

Precritical Interpretation

Most precritical interpreters tended to give David the benefit of the doubt concerning his relationship with Abishag: rather than failing a test of

1. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the Abishag episode cannot be identified as a virility test based on parallel ancient Near Eastern literature. Due to this limitation in scope, I have foregone a detailed analysis of the biblical text. For a study that demonstrates why Abishag is not a virility test from the biblical context, see Richard S. Hess, "David and Abishag: The Purpose of 1 Kings 1:1–4," in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded* (ed. Gershon Galil, Mark Geller, and Alan Millard; VTSup 130; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 427–38.

2. See, for example, Peter Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006) 29–30; Eric Seibert, *Subversive Scribes and the Solomonic Narrative: A Rereading of 1 Kings 1–11* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006) 111; Terence E. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 23; Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1987) 16.

3. See "Critical Interpretation," pp. 4–6 below. The Sumerian folktale was so named by Bendt Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs* (Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology 3; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1975) 90. However, Alster notes that the tale was originally titled "Dialogue between a King, an Old Man, and a Maiden" by E. I. Gordon (*Bibliotheca Orientalis* 17 [1960] 151). See Alster, *Studies*, 125 n. 4.

4. For the purposes of this study, it does not matter much whether one views 1 Kgs 1–2 as the conclusion to the Succession Narrative or the introduction to the books of Kings. Either way, it records the transition of the kingship from David to Solomon. Therefore, we have elected to forego this discussion. Interested parties should see, among others, Leithart (*1 and 2 Kings*, 29–30) for the view that it forms the introduction to Kings and Fritz (*1 and 2 Kings*, 10–13) for the view that it forms the conclusion to the Succession Narrative. Also instructive is James W. Flanagan, "Court History or Succession Document: A Study of 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2," *JBL* 91 (1972) 172–81.

his fitness to rule, David demonstrated his obedience and faithfulness to Yahweh by remaining abstinent, whereas previously he had sinned with Bathsheba.⁵ However, Josephus is unique among precritical interpreters in his treatment of the narrative in that he neither connects David's abstinence to his fitness to rule nor offers a pietistic interpretation of the text.⁶ He only briefly mentions the relationship between David and Abishag, benignly commenting that Abishag's presence was a "remedy against his numbness" and that David was too old to have sex with her.⁷

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 22a) maintains that David was righteous, not impotent, in his abstinence. It states that Abishag wanted to marry David and when he refused she insinuated that he could not sexually perform: "when courage fails the thief, he becomes virtuous." However, the Talmud is clear that David did not sleep with Abishag because he was forbidden from divorcing another of his wives, not because he was impotent (*Sanhedrin* 22a).

Jerome also maintains that David's abstinence did not stem from impotence, though he does note that the text could be taken as "some farcical story or some broad jest from an Atellan play."⁸ He prefers to interpret the text allegorically: Abishag is the wisdom of Prov 4:5–9, a wisdom that brings honor and glory rather than inciting one to sexual sin. Jerome supports his case by referring to men much older than David who still "knew" their wives. David is thus clearly not impotent; Abishag, as wisdom, is holy enough to warm him without causing him to lust.⁹

As a final example, Isho'dad of Merv (c. 850 A.D.) sees the event as a legitimate instance in which David needed warmth; it had nothing to do with court intrigue, impotence, or testing the monarch's ability to rule, though he does place a pietistic spin on the narrative. He argues that David's coldness did not signify frailty but resulted from a frightening experience with an angel who had come to destroy Jerusalem. Consequently, servants brought Abishag the virgin to warm him because "heat and humidity are prevalent in the female sex, and especially in virgins."¹⁰ Isho'dad maintains that David did not have sex with Abishag because he did not want others to think he had asked for her "out of lust." Isho'dad goes on to state that David "paid for his inordinate desire for Bathsheba through his restraint toward this girl and inflicted this punishment on himself: indeed, the sin with Bathsheba remained fixed in his memory until his death."¹¹

In sum, these four representative examples demonstrate that precritical interpreters did not view the Abishag episode as a test of David's

5. This section deals only with pre-Reformation interpreters because the major Reformation writers are conspicuously silent on this text.

6. Josephus, *Ant.* 7:14.3; 8:1.2–3.

7. Josephus, *Ant.* 7:14.3.

8. Jerome, *Letter to Nepotian*, 3.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Isho'dad of Merv, *Books of Sessions* 1:1. Quoted in Marco Conti, ed., *1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (ACCS 5; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008) 2.

11. *Ibid.*, 3.

virility. Instead, they mostly argued that David's abstinence indicates either his or Abishag's integrity.

Critical Interpretation

From the 20th century forward, most critical interpreters hold the view that the Abishag episode insinuates that David is unfit to rule because he cannot sexually perform with Abishag, the beautiful virgin (נְעִירָה יְפָה). As early as 1946, William A. Irwin connects the narrative with "widespread practices in which the ebbing virility of the old monarch was put to the test, since in his person he embodied the vital forces of the nation."¹² Despite the certainty of Irwin's claim, he offers no evidence for these "widespread practices."

G. R. Driver is the first interpreter to offer clear evidence for his argument that the Abishag Episode was meant to test David's sexual power, and therefore his ability to rule.¹³ He does this by relating 1 Kgs 1:1–4 with the Kirta Epic. He proposes that Kirta's desire for a wife "with whom he can have connexion and prove his manhood" indicates that a king must be sexually capable in order to rule, thus making explicit the relationship between virility and the ability to rule.¹⁴ James Flanagan also points briefly to the Kirta Epic, which he claims "associates authority to rule with the personal ability of the king," to justify his assessment that David's "impotence before Abishag" (among other things) demonstrates his incompetence.¹⁵ Other interpreters, however, are not so forthcoming with their evidence. In fact, regarding commentators' lack of textual evidence, Richard Hess notes that "no attempt is made to provide a single specific example elsewhere in the ancient world [of the rejuvenation motif]."¹⁶

John Gray states that the narrative may point to "the survival of a primitive rite of contactual magic to convey the health and heat of the young body to the old king" and that "field anthropology among primitives indicates that the authority and even life of the king depends on his virility."¹⁷ Gray refers to Josephus and Galen and points to a possible parallel with the Kirta Epic.¹⁸ However, he fails to engage these texts further than a passing reference. Similarly, Volkmar Fritz states that "[b]ehind these actions lies the belief that his [David's] lost energy can be recovered by the presence of a young maiden," which is important because "according to ancient Near Eastern tradition—the well-being of the country de-

12. William A. Irwin, "Nation, Society, and Politics," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (ed. H. Frankfort et al.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946) 347.

13. G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Old Testament Studies 3; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 5 n. 5.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Flanagan, "Court History or Succession Document," 174 n. 8.

16. Hess, "David and Abishag: The Purpose of 1 Kings 1:1–4," 434.

17. John Gray, *I and II Kings* (OTL; Chatham: SCM, 1970) 76–77.

18. Gray cites *Ant.* 8:19.3, but is likely referring to *Ant.* 7:14.3 (*I and II Kings*, 77).

pends entirely on the physical capability of its monarch.”¹⁹ Fritz also fails to offer any evidence for his claims.

Richard Nelson insists that David’s failure to have sex with Abishag indicts him as an incapable ruler, claiming that “it was believed that there was a definite link between his [David’s] natural powers and the effectiveness of his rule” and that David had need of “the contagious vitality of a younger person.”²⁰ Nelson cites no evidence for these beliefs, other than that Adonijah attempts to usurp the throne in the next passage.

Jerome T. Walsh assesses the narrative similarly, stating that the phrase “could not get warm” (וְלֹא יָחַם לוֹ) 1 Kgs 1:1 “surely has a double meaning.”²¹ Furthermore, he notes that “the good of the kingdom depends on the king’s health and energy.”²² Walsh points out that bringing a young person to attend an older person was a common therapy in Greek texts (none of which he cites);²³ however, he also notes that the sexual dimension is absent in the Greek texts, which were written a millennium later than Kings.²⁴ The lack of sexual connotations in the Greek texts along with their distance from 1 Kgs 1:1–4 in both propinquity—the texts originated in distinct cultural milieus and geographical locations—and homogeneity—the texts are from distinct genres—discount their usefulness as parallels.²⁵

Peter Leithart argues that the book of Kings opens with a picture of King David as “an exhausted and impotent lame duck” who simply lies in bed with a beautiful woman while the crisis over who would rule after him rages just outside his chambers.²⁶ Drawing on the work of Nelson and Walsh, he argues that the king’s sexual potency is related to his political potency because the latter depends on his ability to secure his throne by providing an heir.²⁷ One wonders if this bears on 1 Kgs 1:1–4, given that Solomon is in fact the tenth of David’s sons and the rest of 1 Kgs 1–2 is concerned with exactly *which* crown prince will come to power.²⁸

C. F. Keil, Mordecai Cogan, August Konkel, and Richard Hess stand apart in their insistence that the issue in 1 Kings is not David’s impotency. Keil, writing in 1872, argues that the narrative demonstrates that David is too weak to rule, but has nothing to do with his so-called impotence: “The

19. Volkmar Fritz, *1 and 2 Kings* (CC; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003) 13.

20. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 16.

21. Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 5.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.* Walsh states that “the underlying theory is that the vigor and energy of the youthful person will spread to the elderly one through physical contact.”

24. *Ibid.*

25. See William Hallo, “Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature,” in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature* (ed. William Hallo, Bruce W. Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly; Scripture in Context 3; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990) 1–30.

26. Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, 29.

27. *Ibid.*, 30. Walter Bruegemann also agrees with this assessment, going so far as to argue that לֹא יָחַם is euphemism for David’s inability to get an erection (*1 and 2 Kings* [Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000] 12).

28. See Seibert, *Subversive Scribes and the Solomonic Narrative*, 114–15.

further remark, 'and the king knew her not,' is not introduced either to indicate the impotence of David or to show that she did not become David's concubine, but simply to explain how it was that it could possibly occur to Adonijah (ch. ii. 17) to ask for her as his wife."²⁹

August Konkel and Mordecai Cogan respond directly to John Gray's assertion, concluding that David *did not* fail a virility test.³⁰ Konkel argues that the narrative "gives no indication that Abishag is sought for the purpose of restoring virility."³¹ Rather, David's unresponsiveness simply indicates that he is no longer the strong, powerful man he once was, thus indicating that the throne is in danger. For Cogan, the real concern in the narrative is who will succeed King David, a problem that existed much earlier than David's servants' attempt to warm him. The episode with Abishag simply "confirm[ed] the decrepit state of David's old age."³² Hess is likewise unconvinced that impotence is the text's primary concern. Instead, impotence is a "sign of a greater issue," namely the survival of the Davidic dynasty.³³ Hess demonstrates that the phrase "old and advancing in years" signals to the reader that something important is about to occur—it is used of Abraham, Sarah, Joshua, and now David. In each case, the phrase precedes "a final, important act" that resolves a particular problem in the narrative.³⁴ In this case, the phrase points to the fact that David's life is fading and that he must act quickly to secure the continuance of his dynasty and covenant with Yahweh.³⁵

PARALLEL TEXTS

Ostensibly, modern interpreters who read the Abishag Episode as attesting to David's sexual impotency and thus ineffectiveness to rule are relying on G. R. Driver's work in the mid-20th century. It is therefore imperative to examine the parallel literature that Driver cites, as well as one other possible parallel, "The Old Man and the Young Woman," in order to determine whether these texts support such an interpretation.

29. Carl F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament Books of Kings* (trans. James Martin; Clark's Foreign Theological Library 4/33; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872) 17. It is important to note that Keil's position assumes that Adonijah was concerned with the virginity of David's concubines, which does not seem to be the case (N. Blake Hearson, personal correspondence). Based on Solomon's response to Adonijah's request, it appears that it was an attempt to regain the throne. Note R. K. Harrison, who states that "possession of . . . [Abishag] would imply right of succession to the throne" (*Old Testament Times: A Social, Political, and Cultural Context* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005]). For a similar reading, see James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986 [1951]) 71–72.

30. See also Donald J. Wiseman, who states "[w]hile this reference is taken by some to denote a virility test to check whether a co-regent was required, there is no sure evidence that disability of itself disqualified a king from reigning (cf. Azariah, 2 Ki. 15:5)" (*1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1993] 68).

31. August Konkel, *1 and 2 Kings* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 52.

32. Mordecai Cogan, *1 Kings* (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 156.

33. Hess, "David and Abishag," 427.

34. *Ibid.*, 431. See Gen 18:1; 24:1; Josh 13:1; 23:1–2.

35. *Ibid.*, 434–37.

Methodology

William Hallo, following Samuel Sandmel, perceptively notes that examining the Hebrew Bible in light of ancient Near Eastern texts is subject to the charge of parallelomania because studies of this type often neglect to address both the similarities and dissimilarities between supposed parallels.³⁶ In order to correct such overuse of parallel literature, Hallo argues that *contrasting* the relevant material is just as important as *comparing* the material, thus modifying “the strictly comparative approach by paying equal attention to possible contrasts between biblical phenomena and their Near Eastern counterparts.”³⁷ Before this can be done, though, it must be determined whether the parallel literature is appropriate to the historical and literary context of the biblical text.³⁸ In the present study, the relationship of the Kirta Epic and “The Old Man and the Young Woman” to the biblical material is defended on the basis of their relative proximity to the biblical material, both in terms of geography and historical and cultural milieu.³⁹ Furthermore, in order to avoid the pitfalls of parallelomania described by Hallo, this article will examine the similarities between the texts as well as their dissimilarities.

With these parameters in mind, the following examination of the Kirta Epic and “The Old Man and the Young Woman” compares and contrasts these texts with 1 Kgs 1:1–4, concluding that the intent of the latter is not to highlight David’s impotence but rather a legitimate attempt by his servants to revive him so that he can once again effectively render justice for his subjects, thus securing his reign. However, David remains unable to rule effectively and therefore appoints his son Solomon as his rightful heir.

THE KIRTA EPIC

Summary

The Kirta Epic was recorded on three separate tablets and relates the story of Kirta, a king who suffers great tragedy but whose fortunes are eventually restored by El.⁴⁰ Tablet A records Kirta’s great loss—his wife, home,

36. Hallo, “Compare and Contrast,” 2. See Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *JBL* 81 (1962) 1–13.

37. Hallo, “Compare and Contrast,” 2. For a recent example of this method, see David P. Melvin, “Divine Mediation and the Rise of Civilization in Mesopotamian Literature and in Genesis 1–11,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10 (2010) article 17. On-line: http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_145.pdf [accessed January 27, 2014].

38. Hallo, “Compare and Contrast,” 3.

39. See *ibid.*, 3–5.

40. For a summary of the Kirta text, see Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 2–5. For the full text, see H. L. Ginsberg, “The Legend of King Keret,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ed. James B. Pritchard; 3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 142–49. For transliteration of the text, see Cyrus H. Gordon (*Ugaritic Textbook: Texts in Transliteration. Cuneiform Selections* [AnOr 38; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965] 194–95). The text cited here is from Dennis Pardee, trans., “The Kirta Epic,” (COS 1.102:333–43).

and offspring are destroyed by multiple tragedies. El speaks to the weeping Kirta in a dream, attempting to console him with various kingly offers, such as a reign similar to Kirta's father, multiple chariots, and vassalage. Initially, Kirta wants only progeny, though he will later ask also for the beautiful Ḥurruya. In Tablet B, El is more than happy to oblige. Kirta receives Ḥurruya in marriage, who within seven years bears him multiple children. Though Kirta seems prosperous, Tablet C begins ominously:

Like a dog we grow old in your house,
 Like a hound in your court;
 Must you also, father, die like mortal men,
 Must your court pass to mourning,
 To the control of women, beloved father? ⁴¹

After multiple failed attempts to find a healer for Kirta, El dispatches Ša'tiqatu to heal him. She flies over a number of towns, washes the sweat from Kirta, and restores his appetite for food, thus establishing her victory over death. Kirta returns to reign over his kingdom after Ḥurruya's meal restores his strength. Kirta finds that his son has surreptitiously attempted to usurp his power. Interestingly, Yašsubu cites Kirta's inability to judge appropriately as the reason for his (Yašsubu's) attempt to overthrow his father:

When raiders lead raids,
 and creditors detain (debtors),
 You let your hands fall slack:
 you do not judge the widow's case,
 you do not make a decision regarding the oppressed
 you do not cast out those who prey upon the poor.
 Before you, you do not feed the orphan,
 behind your back the widow.
 Illness has become as it were (your) bedfellow,
 Sickness (your) constant companion in bed.
 So descend from your kingship, I will reign,
 From your dominion, I yes I, will sit (on your throne).⁴²

Analysis of the Narratives

Table 1 demonstrates that there are numerous similarities between the Kirta Epic and the Narrative of David's Reign, which demonstrates why Driver and others have interpreted the Abishag Episode in light of the Kirta Epic. However, based on a comparison of these two texts, there are significant problems with the assertion that 1 Kgs 1:1–4 is about David's sexual inability, not the least of which is that the events in the narrative of David's reign are actually spread out considerably through the narrative and drawn together in a way that enhances the appearance of similarity when compared to the Kirta Epic.

41. CTA 16:6.1–5.

42. CTA 16:6.45–53.

For example, Kirta “wins” the hand of Ḥurraya by his defeat of Udum. However, David’s *lack* of involvement in the war against Ammon created the circumstances in which he could take Bathsheba from Uriah. Furthermore, whereas Kirta’s relationship with Ḥurraya is cast in a positive light, Nathan fiercely rebukes David for his sin and David suffers dire consequences for his theft of Uriah’s wife, adultery, and murder.

It is also not at all clear from reading the Kirta Epic that Kirta’s desire for a wife is necessarily because he sees sexual ability *as* a prerequisite for effective ruling, as Driver proposes. In fact, what Kirta desires is *children*— “[Permit] me to acquire sons, [P]ermit me to multiply [children].”⁴³ Undoubtedly, copulation is a prerequisite for progeny, but it is not copulation itself that seems to concern Kirta. A closer biblical parallel at this juncture may be Abram’s desire for an heir: “And Abram said, ‘Adonai Yahweh, what will you give to me, for I walk childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’”⁴⁴

Furthermore, when Ša‘tiqatu restores Kirta’s health, the text explains that his appetite for food returns, Ḥurraya cooks him a meal, and he regains his strength. Given that Kirta interacts with Ša‘tiqatu and his wife (two women, although one seems to be divine), it seems that if sexual potency were the issue, then the text would have made this explicit. Instead, the text is conspicuously silent regarding Kirta’s sexual appetite, focusing instead on his desire for food and *its* powers of rejuvenation. Significantly, the author of 1 Kings highlights the fact that David does not have sex with Abishag, thus indicating that the servants’ attempt to revive David was not sexual in nature.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the Kirta Epic and the Narrative of David’s Reign is that Yašsubu justifies his usurpation of Kirta’s throne by pointing to Kirta’s inability to judge effectively: because Kirta spends his days lying on a sickbed, he is unable to defend the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. Similarly, when Absalom tries to wrest Israel from David, Absalom incites the people by pointing out that David is not appropriately judging the people’s legal disputes (2 Sam 15:1–4). Could it be that Adonijah likewise attempts to take over David’s throne because David has been spending too much time in bed rather than effecting justice for the people? The Abishag Episode does not explicitly mention this, but David’s bedridden state, the earlier charges of Absalom, and the parallel episode in the Kirta epic could indicate that David’s inability to judge his kingdom rightly is also an issue in 1 Kgs 1:1–4.

Thus, while it cannot be ignored that these two texts have much in common, it also cannot be maintained that the Kirta Epic demands the interpretation that 1 Kgs 1:1–4 is about David’s sexual prowess. Instead, the comparison of these two texts indicates that David’s authority was

43. CTA 14:2.57–58. It also seems strange that David would be concerned about his progeny at this point in his life, given that Solomon is David’s tenth son, as noted above.

44. Gen 15:2, my translation.

Table 1. Similarities between the Kirta Epic and the Narrative of David's Reign^a

<i>Kirta Epic</i>	<i>Narrative of David's Reign</i>
(1) Kirta wages war against Udum (CTA 14 3.103–150).	(1) David fights against the Ammonites (2 Sam 10:1–11:1; 12:26–31). ¹
(2) As a result, he wins the hand of Ḥurrayaya, eldest daughter of King Pabel (CTA 14 3.136b–153).	(2) This provides the occasion for David's taking Bathsheba, the wife of one of David's soldiers (2 Sam 11:2–27a).
(3) Kirta becomes ill (CTA 16 1.1–5.29).	(3) David cannot "warm himself" (1 Kgs 1:1–2).
(4) Kirta's children become prominent in the narrative (CTA 16 1.1–6.42).	(4) David's sons become prominent in the narrative (2 Sam 15–20; 1 Kgs 1:5–10).
(5) Yašsubu attempts to usurp the throne (CTA 16 6.–42–59).	(5) Absalom and Adonijah each try to usurp the throne (2 Sam 15–20; 1 Kgs 1:5–10)
(6) Yašsubu cites Kirta's inability to effect justice as the reason for his attempt to overthrow Kirta (CTA 16 6.41–54).	(6) Absalom points to David's ineffectual judging in an attempt to garner support for his overthrow of David (2 Sam 15:1–6).
(7) El attempts to revive Kirta through various means (CTA 16 4.1–25).	(7) David's servants attempt to warm him with a young virgin (1 Kgs 1:2–4).
(8) Kirta is revived and regains power (CTA 16 6.1–59).	(8) David overcomes his bedridden state to the extent that he can pass on the kingdom to Solomon (1 Kgs 1:28–53).

^aTable 1 is partially adapted from Stan Rummel (*Ras Shamra Parallels* [The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible 3; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1981] 304), who adapted it from the work of R. A. Carlson (*David the Chosen King: A Traditio-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel* [trans. Eric J. Sharpe and Stanley Rudman; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964]).

In tables 1 and 2, I have retained the order of the Kirta Epic and listed the biblical material next to its parallel in the Kirta Epic. Because of this, the order of the biblical material as listed in the second column is not necessarily chronological. The references will alert the reader to the order of events in the biblical narrative.

in question because his bedridden state had rendered him an ineffectual judge. Just as El sought out means to revive Kirta, David's servants attempted to revive him. In both cases, the attempts at rejuvenation were successful, and the kings reasserted their control over their kingdoms, though in David's situation this meant crowning Solomon as the next king.

"THE OLD MAN AND THE YOUNG WOMAN"

In the most recent edition of his *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, James Crenshaw briefly mentions that the Sumerian folktale "The Old Man and the Young Woman" emphasizes "the mysterious power young girls

Table 2. *Dissimilarities between the Kirta Epic and the Narrative of David's Reign*

<i>Kirta Epic</i>	<i>Narrative of David's Reign</i>
(1) Ḫurraya was given to Kirta because he overpowered her father in battle (CTA 14 3.130–CTA 15 1.29).	(1) Bathsheba was taken by David, not “given” to him (2 Sam 12:2–3).
(2) Kirta himself went out to battle against Udum.	(2) David's treachery was facilitated by his <i>not</i> being on the battlefield (2 Sam 12:1).
(3) Kirta did not suffer rebuke or punishment because of his relationship with Ḫurraya. Instead, he receives the blessing of many children (CTA 15 2.20–3.27).	(3) David was rebuked by Nathan the prophet and told that Yahweh would bring rebellion from within his own house, war would be constant, and that one of his sons would humiliate him by sleeping with one of his wives; furthermore David's son dies (2 Sam 12:10–12).
(4) Two children mourn Kirta's illness (CTA 16 1.1–113).	(4) David's failing health is not mourned.

possess for revitalizing old men.”⁴⁵ He goes on to say that “the same assumption underlies the attempt to restore King David's waning life force by allowing him to sleep with the youthful Abishag (1 Kgs 1:1–4).”⁴⁶ Brendt Alster made the same connection some 35 years earlier, stating that “the crucial motif we have found in this text, an old man marrying a young girl, has a long-lived tradition in literary sources. One would first think of the beautiful Abishag given to King David in his extreme old age.”⁴⁷ Surprisingly, though the sexual connotations of Sumerian folktale are much clearer, most commentators have not referred to this text in their treatment of 1 Kgs 1:1–4.

Summary

This poorly preserved folktale recounts the story of an old man who approaches a king for advice concerning how to cure his failing vigor:

(I was) a youth, (but now) my luck, my strength, my personal god,
and my youthful vigour have left my loins like an exhausted ass.
My black mountain has produced white gypsum.
My mother has brought in a man from the forest, he gave me captivity.

45. James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (3rd ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 265.

46. *Ibid.*, 265–66.

47. Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, 94. Alster mentions the connection again in his more recent work, *The Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2005) 385. However, note that the only other text Alster mentions in this regard is *Canterbury Tales*, which is so far removed from the biblical material that it has no bearing on the interpretation of 1 Kgs 1:1–4.

My mongoose which used to eat strong smelling things does not stretch its neck towards beer and butter.
 My urine used to flow(?) in a strong torrent, (but now) you flee (?) from wind.
 My child whom I used to feed with butter and milk, I can no more support it,
 And I have (had to) sell(?) my little slave girl, an evil demon makes me sick.⁴⁸

Unsure how to proceed, the king enlists the advice of a *zikum*, or sage, who offers the following remedy:

My king, supposed that the old man took a young girl as wife,
 [(in the rest of) his days]—as long as they last, as long as they are—the old man will regain his youthful vigour,
 [and the young girl] will become a mature woman.⁴⁹

Heeding the advice of the *zikum*, the king offers a young woman to the old man, telling her that “he will lie in your lap like a young man.”⁵⁰ The text does not record whether or not the old man actually regained his youthful vigor, but the implication is that the *zikum*'s advice worked—the young woman was able to rejuvenate the old man.

Analysis of the Narratives

There are a few similarities between the Sumerian tale and the Abishag Episode (see table 3). Each narrative concerns an old person whose age has wreaked its havoc and in each case a peripheral character in the narrative suggests a young woman to remedy the situation. However, there are also a number of contrasting elements between the two narratives (see table 4). For example, in the Sumerian tale a man's old age causes him to seek the advice of the king, whereas in David's case the king himself is succumbing to old age and it appears that his servants take it on themselves to prescribe a cure for David. In the case of the old man, he can no longer perform sexually, which is made clear by the reference to an “exhausted ass.”⁵¹ For David, the issue of impotency is far from a foregone conclusion. In fact, the narrator goes out of the way to tell the reader that David did *not* have sex with Abishag. Thus, while the two men are presumably both rejuvenated, it is crucial to note that David is revived to the extent that he can pass the throne to Solomon *without* copulating with Abishag.

48. “The Old Man and the Young Woman,” 9 a.27–35 in Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, 93.

49. “The Old Man and the Young Woman,” 9a.19–21.

50. “The Old Man and the Young Woman,” 9a.38.

51. Concerning the ass as a metaphor for sexual virility, see “The Descent of Ishtar” in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (ed. Stephanie Dalley; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 158. See also Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2003) 199 n. 42.

Table 3. Similarities between “The Old Man and the Young Woman” and the Abishag Episode

<i>“The Old Man and the Young Woman”</i>	<i>Abishag Episode</i>
(1) The old man’s age has resulted in the loss of all youthful vigor (SSP 9 a.27–35).	(1) David has become an old man, unable to warm himself (1 Kgs 1:1).
(2) A <i>zikrum</i> advises that the old man be given a young wife, whose youthfulness will revive him as he lies in her lap (SSP 9 a.19–20, 38).	(2) David’s servants bring to him a young woman who will lie in his bosom and warm him (1 Kgs 1:2).
(3) The old man presumably recovers.	(3) David overcomes his bedridden state long enough to install Solomon as the ruler of his kingdom (1 Kgs 1:28–48).

Table 4. Dissimilarities between “The Old Man and the Young Woman” and the Abishag Episode

<i>“The Old Man and the Young Woman”</i>	<i>Abishag Episode</i>
(1) A <i>zikrum</i> supplies the remedy.	(1) David’s servants supply the remedy.
(2) The reference to an “exhausted ass” overtly implies the old man’s impotence (SSP 9 a.28).	(2) The narrator explicitly states that David did not have sex with Abishag, but this does not necessarily imply that he was <i>unable</i> to do so (1 Kgs 1:4).

One should not discount the similarities between these two narratives, but the differences must also be considered when determining the value of “The Old Man and the Young Woman” for interpreting the role of Abishag. Given the important differences regarding the sexual innuendos of each narrative, it would be erroneous to import the idea of impotence from the Sumerian folktale when the Abishag episode makes clear that David did not have sex with Abishag and yet recovered from his sickness long enough to make Solomon king. Therefore, in regards to the relationship between these two texts, the most that can be said is that each narrative records an instance in which a young woman is brought to an old man with the hopes of rejuvenating him.

King David, King Kirta, and the Old Man

This article has shown that the work of G. R. Driver and others focuses on the many similarities between the Kirta Epic and the Abishag Episode without giving due attention to their dissimilarities. Likewise, James Crenshaw and Alster Brendt only briefly mention that “The Old Man and the Young Woman” has close affinities with the Abishag Episode and neglect

to mention any dissimilarities between the two texts.⁵² As a result of Driver's work, it has become quite popular for modern interpreters to read 1 Kgs 1:1–4 as a virility test that indicates David is no longer fit to rule over Israel. However, those who follow Driver's reading offer very little, if any, evidence to support their adherence to his interpretation, and those who do simply point to one of the two parallel texts discussed above without sufficiently interacting with them.

The present work has corrected these studies by employing Hallo's contextual method to compare and contrast the Abishag Episode with its ancient Near Eastern parallels. On close examination of these texts, it became clear that they do not support the modern thesis that Abishag was meant to test David's sexual prowess. The old man from the Sumerian tale shares a few similarities with David, but their differences are far greater, therefore limiting the folktale's importance for interpreting 1 Kgs 1:1–4. On the other hand, King Kirta and King David share many similarities, though none of these relate to virility: the son of each king (two sons in David's case!) attempts to usurp his power because of the king's inability to rule effectively; in each narrative, the king is revived so that he can reassert his authority; and in each narrative, the focus is on the continuance of the kingdom, not on the king's ability to copulate. Therefore, based on a contextual reading of these narratives, it is perhaps best to read the Abishag Episode as an attempt by David's servants to revive him in order to ensure that his reign would not be overthrown by his renegade son, Adonijah.

52. See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 265–266; Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, 94; idem, *The Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 385.