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Biblical/modern intergenerational conflict: four modern German poets on "Abishag the Shunammite"

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Abstract In this article, I would like to focus on four poems written with almost the same background: the German world at the beginning of the twentieth century. An additional factor connecting the four poems is their biblical theme: Abisag of Sunem. The poems are 'Abisag von Sunem' (by Agnes Miegel); 'David und Abisag' (Erstes Buch der Könige, Kapitel 1.1–4)' by Franz Theodor Csokor; 'Abisag' by R.M. Rilke; and 'Abisag' by Hedwig Caspari. Each poem presents a new reading of the biblical text. Furthermore, my interpretation will demonstrate that this group of poems can be read as referring to two subjects: the generation gap and the lack of communication as its consequence. The use of the biblical story of King David and Abisag and its end with Solomon's murder of Adonijah is employed as a key that allows a variety of interpretations of the diverse approaches to the general themes which concerned the writers at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Keywords Poetry · Twentieth century · Abisag of Sunem · Agnes Miegel · Franz Theodor Csokor · R.M. Rilke · Hedwig Caspari

Marc Chagall—a renowned painter of biblical scenes—once observed, "Ever since early childhood, I have been captivated by the Bible. It has always seemed to me and still seems today the greatest source of poetry of all time" (Wullschlager 2008, p. 350). This article focuses on four poets—Agnes Miegel, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Theodor Csokor, and Hedwig Caspari—who shared Chagall's fascination with the Bible and took the same biblical theme as one of their subjects: Abishag the Shunammite. This brief and obscure account in 1 Kings 1 became very popular with modern poets, including Jewish-American Yiddish writers such as Itzik Manger and

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Jacob Glatstein, and Hebrew writers such as Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir, Yaakov Fichman, and Yehuda Amichai (Kartun-Blum 1999).

The German poems examined here were all written during the same period and in roughly the same milieu—the Germany (and Austro-Hungarian Empire) of the early twentieth century. What led these four authors to choose this obscure incident? Why did they turn to the Hebrew Bible for their theme? Does their treatment of the biblical text reflect not only their literary interests but also contemporary issues? If so, how does it do so and what topics are represented in their texts? In this article I would like to focus on the way these authors used the biblical theme of Abishag as a way of dealing with contemporary issues. Rather than engaging in a close literary analysis of the poems my focus thus lies on endeavouring to illustrate how each poet employed the biblical story in order to convey his ideas.

As indicated by their titles—"Abisag von Sunem" (Agnes Miegel), "Abisag" (Rainer Maria Rilke and Hedwig Caspari), and "David und Abisag" (*Erstes Buch der Könige*, Kapitel 1.1–4)" (Franz Theodor Csokor)—all four poems are based on the same biblical hypotext or intertext. Abishag the Shunammite—a beautiful virgin—is brought to David in his old age in order to warm his bones, no sexual relations taking place between them:

> Now King David was old, advanced in years; and they put covers on him, but he could not get warm. Therefore his servants said to him, "Let a young woman, a virgin, be sought for our lord the king, and let her stand before the king, and let her care for him; and let her lie in your bosom, that our lord the king may be warm." So they sought for a lovely young woman throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the king. The young woman was very lovely; and she cared for the king, and served him; but the king did not know her. (1 Kgs 1:1–4)

In the following chapter, Adonijah asks Bathsheba to intercede with his older brother Solomon, after the latter has been given the throne, for permission to marry Abishag:

> … he said, "You know that the kingdom was mine, and all Israel had set their expectations on me, that I should reign. However, the kingdom has been turned over, and has become my brother's; for it was his from the LORD. Now I ask one petition of you; do not deny me … Please speak to King Solomon, for he will not refuse you, that he may give me Abishag the Shunammite as wife." (1 Kgs 2:15)

Solomon clearly regards the seemingly innocent request as a declaration of war: "King Solomon answered and said to his mother, 'Now why do you ask Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? Ask for him the kingdom also'" (1 Kgs 2:22). Here, Abishag serves as way for Adonijah to usurp his brother's claim to the throne and overthrow him.

On the biblical level, Abishag is thus a completely unknown—although "exceedingly beautiful"—girl whom David's courtiers find to serve as a "pre-electricity heating blanket," in the words of Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, who later

becomes a pawn in the rivalry for the throne between David's sons, Solomon and Adonijah (2009, p. 122).

Having established the biblical context and framework of the story of Abishag, our next question in investigating why four modern German poets took this incident as their subject is to inquire whether any use of it was made in early Christian or Jewish tradition. Christian writers make virtually no reference to the incident. One of the few to treat it is St. Jerome in a letter to Nepotian (394 C.E.), wherein rather implausibly adduces her as a prototype of the Virgin Mary: "Let Wisdom alone embrace me; let her nestle in my bosom, my Abishag who grows not old. Undefiled truly is she, and a virgin forever for although she daily conceives and unceasingly brings to the birth, like Mary she remains undeflowered" (52.4). Further references to this story by Christian writers almost always allude to Jerome's exegesis.

The Jewish midrashic tradition—which entered Christian biblical exegesis largely due to the work of Jerome (Brown 1992; Kamesar 1993)—similarly pays scant attention to this episode. Geoffrey Hartman defines midrash as a mode of commentary that, while explicitly linked to Scripture on a certain level, is unsatisfied with the text as it stands, demanding more of the original in the original—more story, more words within the words. In other words, it wishes for something more, not something different (Hartman 2004, p. 201).

The sole midrash to be found on the story of Abishag occurs in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 22a) in a discussion of rules regulating the king. She is apparently adduced here in order to explain why David could "have" her but not Adonijah—namely, because David was a monarch and Adonijah merely a "commoner" (according the Talmudic text). The midrashist then proceeds to elucidate who she was. Unhappy with the appearance of impropriety in her task, she asked David to marry her, mocking him when he says he cannot because he has already reached the permitted number of eighteen wives: "When the thief has nothing to steal, he becomes virtuous." David then summons Bathsheba in order to prove his virility to her.

Neither Christian nor Jewish tradition thus offered any precedents or models for interpreting the biblical account of Abishag. In his volume on *Modern poems on the Bible*, however David Curzon argues that, when dealing with biblical themes, modern poets act like ancient midrashic commentators—reading not only the biblical text but also between its lines: "Whether the poets knew it or not, and some of them did, they were writing midrash. Their reactions to biblical texts are both strikingly modern and within an ancient genre" (Curzon 1994, p. 3). As Meir Gertner, writing about "Biblische Spiegelbilder," notes, "Gute Bibelgedichte sind immer zugleich Spiegelbild des Dichters und Zeitspiegel seiner Epoche" (Gertner 1969, p. 167). Daniel Boyarin makes a similar point, asserting that the relation between the midrash and the Bible presents a "model of the relation between text and interpretation between the present and the past." Midrash thus realizes its goal by means of a "hermeneutic of recombining peices of the canonized exemplar into a new discourse" (Boyarin 1990, pp. 37–38).

The very choice of a biblical prose passage, rewritten in poetic form, thus embodies the "anxiety of influence" that finds expression in intergenerational conflict. Just like the rabbinic midrashists working in the wake of the disruption of

their times—the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jewish autonomy—so too modern German poets composed their works as "fragments to shore themselves up against the ruin" of their own times (Eliot).

As many scholars contend in analysing the development of German politics, much of this was a consequence of the prominently discussed and adduced *Hausvater* tradition. As Tom Taylor observes, despite the changes that took place in the economic function of the household during the nineteenth century, patriarchy remained strong, particularly within the middle-class household, where "wives and children remained under the all-powerful thumb of the *Übervater*. The theme of the persistence of patriarchy in the modern era has thus constituted one of the central explanations for Germany's stunted or abortive path of modernization in the *Sonderweg* paradigm" (Taylor 1995, pp. 55–56).

This patriarchal paradigm was also clearly exhibited in the "intergenerational conflict" that characterized the Wilhelmine period, during which all four of the poets we are discussing here lived and wrote. Discussing the term "generation" and the generation theories that flourished at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in German-speaking Europe, Robert Wohl argues that the synonymy between "youth" and "generation" that developed in the German language was an "innovation in linguistic usage … linked to the appearance of the Youth Movement" (Wohl 1979, pp. 42–43). Amongst the goals of this association—founded in 1896—was the rejuvenation of German life. As Arthur Moeller van den Bruck wrote in the 1890s, the nation "needed a change of blood, an insurrection of the sons against the fathers, a substitution of the old by the young" (Wohl 1979, p. 44).

Generational conflict thus became a pivotal issue during this period. As Jürgen Reulecke notes, from the end of the eighteenth century up until the Nazi era, the tension and conflict between the "youth"—however this term is understood—and the established generations played a decisive part in shaping German political development. Although the roots of these generational tensions can undoubtedly be traced further back, their first buds sprouted most prominently during the Wilhelmine era. "In short, there was an explosion of concern with, and awareness of, youth that was arguably far more extreme than in other industrialized Western nations" (Reulecke 1995, pp. 92–93).

The *Menschenbild* characteristic of this epoch was represented by two antithetical models—*die wilhelminische Vätergeneration*, which maintained strict, traditional ideas regarding education—and the liberal pro-Youth Movement that sought pedagogical reform (Koebner 1985, Reulecke 2003). The clash between these two perspectives—the parent versus the child—that lay at the heart of the generational struggle can be directly traced to the emergence of modernity. As Whaley notes, from the late eighteenth century onwards, the ideal of youth in Germany was linked to a particular set of ideas or uncertainties about modern society (Whaley 1995, pp. 47–48). One of the most prominent symbols of this trend was the *Wandervogel*—a youth hiking movement whose "youth for themselves" message represented for many an increasing rift between fathers and sons. One of its early members, Hans Blüher, observed that a "not insignificant number of young members feel nothing but hatred and disdain for their parents. … Where father and

son lived together comfortably, where the father permitted his son to develop his character without opposition and expressed pride in his offspring, there was no foundation for the *Wandervogel*" (Taylor 1995, p. 67). A teacher by the name of Ludwig Gurlitt, identified the same problem across the whole country: "Never has the distance between the force of the old authoritarians been greater" (ibid).

Similar sentiments were embodied in *Das Junge Deutschland* movement, whose principal goal followed the "basic trend of the period"—to awaken a political life in Germany and to educate the German youth along progressive lines. Here, for the first time, the writer felt obliged to actively engage in politics—i.e., to fight against the reactionary tendencies of the various governments (Brann 1951, p. 190). As Mark Roseman notes, "If we cast off the distorting lens created by the terms in which it described itself, Young Germany seems as much a class movement as an expression of generation conflict" (Roseman 1995, p. 12).

The themes of intergenerational and class conflict became commonplace in the literature of the period. Exhibiting a tendency towards broadening into an attack against the older generation in general, the ethics of social success and conformity, and conventional sexual ethics, the son-father conflict acquired the status of a symbol rather than simply constituting a socio-psychological fact (Pascal 1973). In an article examining four dramatic expressionist plays, R.W. Sheppard speaks of the son-father conflict in terms of the Oedipal complex (Sheppard 1986). In our poems, however, the conflict is rather between the old man and the young woman. As we shall see, the four poems we are discussing here depict the patriarchal image of the older generation via David, the role of the younger generation being represented primarily by Abishag (with the addition of King David's sons—Adonijah and Solomon—in two of the poems). The conflict will thus be presented between young and old and not only within the nuclear family.

These motifs are clearly reflected in Agnes Miegel's (1879–1964) poem "Abisag von Sunem" (Appendix 1). First published in the *Göttinger Musenalmanach* in 1901, this was subsequently included her first volume of poetry published in the same year.[1] Perhaps best known for her ballads—"Persönliche Erlebnisse, Sagen und Legenden und das Hell-Dunkle ostpreußischer Geschichte bilden den Hintergrund ihres Werkes, das die Ballade und die balladeske Form der Erzählung zu neuem Höhepunkt geführt hat" (Kyritz 1971, p. 58)—"Abisag von Sunem" belongs rather to her five Jewish history poems. As Anni Piorreck notes, these more resemble lyrical and epic narratives: "Fünf Gedichte gehören in die jüdische Geschichte und sind keine echten Balladen, sondern mehr lyrisch-epische Verserzählungen" (Piorreck 1967, p. 61).

The poem opens with a narrator who describes the setting. David sends his servants to look for a young girl to warm the old king, Jehu Ben Yakob finding a suitable candidate. In the second stanza, however, the narrator is replaced by Abishag, who dominates the remainder of the poem, the narrator only reappearing in the final two lines. Thus while Abishag's own voice is never heard in the biblical text, she becomes the speaker in the poem. Inherent to its structure is thus a

[1] My thanks go to Nikola Herweg of the Deutsche Schillergesellschaft for permission to use Agnes Miegel's poem.

"conflict" between narrator and protagonist, Abishag's inner despair and turmoil being set against the narrator's dispassionate description (Hermann 2011).

Despite making her voice heard, however, Abishag initially remains a pawn, Jehu ben Jakob—whom Miegel appears to represent as her father—commanding her: "Küsse die Hände dem greisen,/Sitze nieder mit ihm zum Mahl,/Sing ihm die Hirtenwiesen!" The implication that her own father brought her into the old king's bed highlights Abishag's objectification by the older generation. Her youth here forming a source of warmth, she merely serves as a "hot-water bottle."

Her inner conflict—hatred mixed with resentment—parallels her outward bondage, symbolized in the triple anaphora: "Ich muß," "Ich muß," "und muß." Her youth is indentured to an old, half-senile man who gains his joy from listening to shepherds' songs, and only sleeps after he has drunk too much. While she seeks to take the initiative—singing to the king, giving him to drink, lulling him, covering him with her hair, and caressing him—his compliments both scare and anger her. The proximity between the *heiß* and *Haß* indicate that her hatred (*Haß*) is the outcome of her hot (*heiß*) blood.

At the end of the poem, Miegel introduces the motif of Abishag's feelings towards Adonijah. Here, too, Miegel suggests that Abishag feels very differently towards him than the biblical text intimates. The gingery Adonijah is clearly more handsome than the white-headed king, the disparity between father and son being deliberately highlighted: the red versus white locks, the cold body that calls for covering with Abishag's hair vs. Adonijah's hot skin and rosy pomegranate-blossom lips (the *blüten* possibly also hinting at Abishag's hot blood [*Blut*]). Adonijah and Abishag thus complement rather than contrast with one another. While Abishag is compelled to cradle David—an act she finds profoundly repugnant—the thought of embracing of Adonijah cause her to rejoice (*jauchzend*). It nonetheless on the level of wishful thinking. Significantly, however, while Abishag is objectified at beginning of the poem, she plays an active role to that of the king's passive one in the continuation.

The poem thus highlights three major themes: Abishag's feelings, the contrast between the passive old and active young, and the intergenerational triangle. As Marianne Kopp notes, this binary motif of old versus new—youth versus old age/past versus future/beginnings versus endings—occurs throughout Miegel's work (Kopp 1993).

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) also wrote several poems—published in *Neue Gedichte* (1907)—that drew on passages from both the Old and New Testaments, including "Abisag" and "David singt vor Saul" (Sievers 1938; Egenhoff 1968; Schanen 1997). "Abisag" treats King David's old age and his deathbed fantasies of restoring his sexual potency via the ministrations of the virginal young woman Abishag. The biblical text only referring to the old king's chills, this reading of the biblical text reflects Rilke's characteristic approach to Scripture in the *Neue Gedichte* (Schanen 1997, p. 168). The tripartite poem about David and Saul, which approaches the problem of ageing from the prospective of the youthful David, thus forms a kind of pendant to the treatment of David's fading power in "Abisag" (Ryan 1999).

The bipartite "Abisag" (see Appendix 2) allows Rilke to tell the story from two angles, the first section giving us Abishag's perspective, the second David's (although the king is not identified by name). By refraining from giving the protagonists their own voice, Rilke imbues the episode with a tragic tone (Ryan 1999).

Despite Abishag's silence, she finds a way to expresses her feelings. Like Miegel, Rilke focuses on the age difference between the alluring maiden and the senescent monarch. As Brigitte Bradley notes, the poems of which "Abisag" forms a part all emphasise various contrasts—including the old versus young (Bradley 1967). This motif occurs in the very first stanza. While David's body is described as "wilting" (*der Welkenden*), Abishag's arms as firm as a child's. Abishag is also afraid of his senectitude (*ein wenig bang vor seinen vielen Jahren*). Like Miegel, Rilke hints at Abishag's inferiority and subordinate position: someone else must place her arms on the old man and her feelings are articulated via the natural elements—the frightening owl's scream and the lure of the stars and wind.

The words *Und manchmal* in the second stanza function as a watershed in the poem, indicating the point at which Abishag starts yearning for a real love affair (Motté 2003). While the final stanza demonstrates that her sense of duty will not allow her to forsake her task, the two figures can find no channel of communication. Refusing to be conquered by the old king—either sexually or emotionally—Abishag lies *wie eine Seele leicht*. This metaphor highlights the contrast between her warm, vibrant soul and David's cold body (*seinem fürstlichen Erkalten*).

The second poem of the cycle gives us David's perspective, although here—in contrast to the biblical "singer of songs"—he possesses no voice. This communication-by-gestures represents what Baumgarten calls the "selfication of the hero's self" (Baumgarten 1984, p. 136). He regards his relationship with Abishag as a failure, intercourse—in all its meanings—being replaced by two isolated selves mired in their singular sequestration. Revealing the trajectory of his grand effort, it expresses in lyric speech its heroic culmination—silence (*ibid*).

The first stanza distinguishes David's day persona from his night self. During the day, all he is capable of doing is thinking of the past and petting his beloved dog. Against this decay and degeneration, Abishag enters at night, bending over him in ministration. Just as the word *Aber* symbolizes the contrast between the day-lethargy and night-activity, so the metaphors accentuate the chasm between the old king and the young Abishag. The confusion of David's life—like an abandoned sea coast—contrasts with Abishag's star-twinkling breasts. David and Abishag are destined never to "know" one another but to pass like "ships in the night"—the coast never reaching the horizon to meet the stars. The silence that engulfs them further underscores their failure to communicate.

The second stanza further highlights the fruitlessness of their relationship by adducing its non-sexual nature. The old king—who had "known" many women in his day understands from Abishag's unmoving brows and unkissed mouth that she is unaroused by him. Her emotions (*Gefühl*) failing to respond to David's "reason" (*Grund*), her *grüne* rod also contrasts with David's "earth"—the green thus representing youth and feelings versus the old age and rationality of the earth. The metaphor of *grüne Rute* is even more interesting when compared with the use of the

term *Rute* in Isa 11:1: "Und es wird eine Rute aufgehen von dem Stamm Isais und eine Zweig aus seiner Wurzel Frucht bringen." This verse refers to king David' s progeny. In light of the fact that the biblical text intimates that the king did not have sexual relations with Abishag, Rilke's stress lies here on the sterility of the relationship between the two figures. As François Schanen notes, the metaphor evinces a gender confusion, the phallic green rod representing Abishag's sexuality that does not find the king's bed (Schanen 1997). This contrasts the king's impotency with Abishag's fresh (*grüne Rute*) sexual arousal. Hinted at in the first part of the poem, this is completely independent of the king. As the *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* notes, *Rute* also signifies the clitoris. Rilke thus downplays the gender confusion.

The final two lines indicate David's reaction to Abishag's indifference. Freezing, he seeks a "life-force" within himself. Rilke likens his attentiveness to that of a dog, recalling his caressing of his pet at the end of the first stanza—where, symbolically, it represented his only movement. His feeling of being frozen reflects his comprehension that his days are over, not even Abishag's sparkling constellation of stars being able to warm or revive him. If at the beginning of the poem David is only able to communicate with his dog, even this capacity deserts him at its conclusion. Both sections thus convey the lack of communication between the two protagonists—the first intimating Abishag's loneliness as she wraps herself around the cold king's body, the second David's knowledge that she is not attracted to him.

As William Waters observes, the "hidden theme" of the *New Poems* is thus loss—or more radically, the elusiveness of reality itself. The early twentieth century in many ways constituting the end of an era in the European economic and social order, Rilke reflects this circumstance in the variations on the motif of transitoriness he employs. "In a larger number of poems, the sense of the elegiac … appear[s] rather as a fascination with the material traces of the past. Throughout the volume, remnants—token of earlier times—haunt the present" (Waters 2010, p. 71). The two protagonists represent the past and present respectively, separated by an unbridgeable communication gap. While Abishag experiences a sexual awakening (Bradley 1967), David laments the loss of his virility. Here, too, the intergenerational rift is underscored.

Franz Theodor Csokor (1885–1969) wrote his historical poems—including "David und Abisag"—in 1912. As Brygida Brandys notes, in line with the ethical standards espoused by Expressionism, Csokor fought against the self-centered isolation of the individual (Brandys 1992). His early poetry reveals his discontent with the current state of social affairs, his *Historische Balladen* (1912) representing both a personal cry of pain and a recognition that the individual's suffering forms part of the collective ache. As Márton Kalász remarks, the pain associated with the helplessness, anger, and despair experienced by the individual found expression in his poems and ballads (Kalász 1992).

Like many of Csokor's ballads and poems, "David und Abisag" (see Appendix 3) comprises a dramatic monologue spoken by the senescent David to Abishag.[2] While Miegel's poem reveals Abishag's feelings, Csokor addresses David's emotions.

[2] My thanks go to Irmgard Broz-Rieder for permission to use Franz Theodor Csokor's poem.

Here, too, the age difference plays a major role, David hoping that Abishag will not merely serve to ward off the cold but also help to shelter him from death. While Abishag is treated virtually as an object—David's *braune Decke*—she is also depicted as the bride of Canticles: her eyes resembling a *Quelle*, they are the sole object upon which David—afraid of the dawning day and death—wishes to look. While the "sealing" of the spring in Canticles represents the bride's virginity and promise, Csokor depicts Abishag's eyes as *felsengraue*—a hard, grey rock. Rather than moist and flowing, the spring has dried up and can no longer yield any bounty.

Other motifs from Canticles also occur. In an inversion of the biblical text, Abishag is an unblemished, glowing fruit. Rather than David's fruit being "sweet to her mouth" (cf. Cant 2:3), she is the perfect fruit he will never taste. These allusions highlight the sterility of the relationship between the freezing old king and the glowing young maiden. Because David cannot respond to Abishag—*Dich will ich, dich!—und kann dir doch nichts geben*—she remains untouched and "undamaged." At the same time, she is his only comfort—the only refuge against death because she does not count the minutes until his demise.

David's cry in the final line of the poem underscores his pain on contemplating the fact that he has become an old, dry tree. This image recalls Isa 56:3, which indicates that eunuchs were associated with withered foliage. Here, David's sexual impotency—made more manifest in/by the presence of the beautiful young maiden—is likened to castration. In contrast to the *dürres Holz*, Abishag is a dynamic—if mute—young tendril. This budding shoot prompts his hatred—towards his age, her youth, and his successor (Motté 2003). Like Abishag's hatred towards David in Miegel's "Abisag von Sunem," this resentment is generated by David's sense of helplessness in the face of reality. Just as Abishag is his only solace in the face of cold, mocking death, she is also a permanent reminder of his lost potency.

Here again, the generation conflict and lack of communication between the old king and young maiden—demonstrated most conspicuously through Abishag's muteness—constitute central themes. The fact that the king's voice is the only one heard in the poem deepens the estrangement between the two protagonists, the allusions to Canticles—and particularly the inversion of their meaning—also heightening their mutual alienation. The Song of Songs representing the dialogue of love between lovers *par excellence*, Csokor's references to it serve to underscore Abishag's silence and the dissociation between the old king and youthful maiden.

Hedwig Caspari (1882–1922) was born and lived in Berlin. Although Jewish, we cannot be certain of what sort of education she received or the nature of her Jewish identity, German Jewry at the beginning of the twentieth century being very diverse. Virtually nothing has been written about her work or life. She published two books during her lifetime—a play entitled *Salomos Abfall* (1920) and a volume of poetry entitled *Elohim* (1919). Writing in *Das Zelt* two years after her death, Auguste Hauschner also refers to two unpublished manuscripts—*Das Blut*, a three-act play dealing with transgressive sibling love and *I.N.R.I* poems encapsulating painful images and visions and the passion-filled screams of the one hanging on the cross (Hauschner 1924, p. 101).

Many of Caspari's poems were published in expressionist journals—*Die Schöne Rarität*, *Saturn*, and *Der Friede* (*Lexikon deutsch-jüdischer Autoren*, 1997). Some were also included in Hartmut Vollmer's anthology of expressionist women poets (Vollmer 1993). Her book *Elohim* addresses diverse biblical themes, demonstrating her skill in weaving narratives out of the scanty information provided by the biblical texts. In a cycle of six poems, for example, she succeeds in turning the genealogy in 1 Chr 1:1–12 into an imaginative creation that nonetheless resonates with the biblical text. Although "Abisag" (see Appendix 4) manifests the same artistry, it is the only poem in the volume devoted to a female biblical character, making it unique in the collection.

Like Miegel, Caspari seeks to convey Abishag's emotions. Her reworking of the biblical episode differs from those discussed above, however, in focusing on Abishag's role in Adonijah's murder. The poem opens by adducing the same dichotomy as that manifest in the other poems—between the freezing old king and the "hot" young girl. Caspari's Abishag is "wie jung gereifter Wein,/Der in eigner Gärung überstanden"—a reflection of her inner fire. Her "heat" is thus simultaneously comforting and dangerous. While compassionate to the old, she is destructive to the young without even being aware of her power, leading them to commit such abominable deeds as murder.

Her awareness of her own power only comes when it is already too late. Her fear of herself only surfaces when she sees Adonijah's freezing body lying in a pool of blood. Facing his corpse, the insight she had previously lacked strikes her forcefully, forcing the realization that the passion she had stirred in the two brothers had been responsible for Adonijah's assassination. Her immediate reaction to this awareness is an internal coldness and sense of self-damnation.

In the next stanza, she yearns for the security she had felt in lying in David's bosom. In contrast to the fervour that ran through her own blood and stirred the young princes' veins until it spilled out and froze on the ground, the old king's blood runs slowly towards death, providing her with a feeling of peace and security. The final stanza depicts Abishag's suicide: crushing her chest in rebellion against God for not reviving the aged, freezing David through her embraces, she dies a virgin.

Throughout the poem, Caspari plays with the antitheses of cold versus hot, young versus old, life versus death. David, nearing death, is freezing; the young Abishag is warm and hot. Her internal ardour generates the heat between the young brothers that brings about Adonijah's death, his body left to lie in his frozen blood. His murder causes Abishag to feel a coldness in her inner core, ultimately leading to her own death, her limbs growing stiffer and cooler.

At the heart of the poem lies Abishag's emotional development—her dawning awareness of her deadly influence on the brothers, paralleling her physical cooling as she approaches her own death. As in many of her biblical poems, Caspari creates a completely new story out of the sparse biblical details. Although the main characters are given, she fabricates new connections between them, the feelings and antitheses she adds emphasizing its dramatic aspect. Abishag missing and longing for David, however, his peacefulness contrasts with the fratricide and suicide that are his legacy to his heirs.

The intergenerational conflict Caspari's poem thus reflects differs from that portrayed in Miegel's, Rilke's, and Csokor's works. Caspari's work is far more pessimistic. Nobody here maintains a prolonged existence: David is fading towards death, Adonijah lies murdered in his own blood, and Abishag dies at her own hand. Although the blood of the younger generation (Abishag, Solomon, and Adonijah) is (or was, in Adonijah's case) hot in contrast to the old king's cold blood, the heat has a disastrous effect. While reflecting the generation difference, Caspari also exhibits a yearning for the past.

Caspari's poem was written during the later part of the war—certainly by its end (although its precise date of composition is unknown, it was first published in 1919). While the younger generation initially regarded the war as a means of redemption (Wohl 1979), they quickly recognized its terror and began protesting against it in their writings (Allen 1979). In a very real sense, it can thus be perceived as bringing the change experienced in Germany and the European modern world to a climax. The 1918 revolution that followed in Germany also opened up new, unknown possibilities—the "new" posing an equally frightening threat as war. Having witnessed the horror, Caspari reflects it in her portrayal of Abishag's feelings—apparently not being convinced that rejuvenation was possible.

All four poems can thus clearly be seen to embody and address two interrelated themes: the intergenerational conflict and its consequence—lack of communication. Miegel's Abishag cannot bond with the old David, preferring his younger son. Rilke's David and Abishag cannot communicate with one another, the gap between them being accentuated by the fact that Abishag's sexuality awakens as David's dissipates. Csokor's David objectifies young Abishag in order to hide from death, coming to hate her in the process because her jejunity constantly confirms his impotency. Unaware of her youthful yet deadly influence until it is too late, Caspari's Abishag commits suicide.

Although each approaches the biblical story from a different perspective, they are reworking of a prior text. Nor is this any text: forming part of Scripture, it possesses authoritative status. The use of biblical motifs to address present concerns was a device commonly adopted in the literature of the time, constituting part of the tendency to use the religious language in a new secular form. As Nehama Aschkenazy observes, re-reading the biblical text in and of itself represents a rebellion against tradition: "In this context, the modern writers' dialogue with the Bible can be viewed as grounded in response to, and rebellion against, the authoritative text, the 'Father' of all texts" (2004, p. 6). By taking a biblical theme and re-reading it as dealing with current issues, poets could expose the conflicts of the society they lived in without adopting an open, naturalistic form of expression. Their personal struggle with the authority of the past and the authoritative text is thus mirrored in their preoccupation with the intergenerational clash provoked by the advent of the twentieth century that so distinctively characterized the German-speaking world's attempt to deal with the inauguration of modernity.

The intergenerational strife between fathers and sons was also reflected in the "strong vein of social criticism" prevalent in the literature of the Wilhelmine period (Feuchtwanger 2002, p. 53). As Berghahn writes of the artists of the epoch, their aim being to change the world and create a tangible new culture, creativity

constituted for them not merely "*l'art pour l'art*" but a judicial investigation designed to uncover and rectify social injustice (Berghahn 1994).

The three poems written within the Wilhelmine period and prior to the First World War stress the contrast between the young Abishag and the old king, seeking a way to deal with the sense that society had lost its way. As Mark Roseman notes,

> By the end of the nineteenth century, the sense that the nation had lost its way and that the vigour and authority of its leadership was being undermined had become so strong that it spilled over into the private domain … many writers and increasingly, many sections of the youth movement saw the family as part of the process whereby the warrior male was weakened and feminised. (1995, p. 19)

Miegel, Rilke, and Csokor all portrayed as the aged king David as "warrior male" who has been "weakened." In Miegel's poem, he must be sung to sleep like an old infant in Abishag's arms. In Rilke and Csokor's pieces, he is depicted as sexually impotent. In all three works, Abishag's youth (in Miegel, also Adonijah's) stands in contrast to the senescent king. Abishag as the symbol of jejunity is described as someone who still has a prospect: in Miegel's poem, she dreams of love, in Rilke, she yearns for something else as her sexuality is aroused, and in Csokor her green tendril seeks to flourish. In Caspari's poem, no one appears to possess a future: the old King is slowly moving towards his death, Adonijah lies murdered in his own blood, and Abishag dies at her own hand. Perceiving the effects of the First World War, Caspari depicted it in her portrayal of Abishag's feelings, precluding any notion of a future because death reigns supreme. Despite the palpable generation difference in Caspari's poem (Abishag, Solomon, Adonijah all being depicted as being "hot-blooded" in contrast to David's chilled bones), Abishag misses the old King because he is serene.

Another point of difference between the four poems is evident in the way they depict the intergeneration conflict. This divergence may be connected to a gender issue, the disparity reflecting the male/female divide. Rilke and Csokor stress the king's impotence as being key to the failed communication between the old and the young, adducing intercourse in its dual meanings. The silence between David and Abishag thus corresponds to the lack of sexuality between them. In Miegel and Caspari, on the other hand, impotence plays no role, another element rather being introduced—namely, David's son(s). By creating a triangular relationship, these two poets stress the difference between the generations. In both poems, the "hot-blooded" of the younger generation contrasts with the passive old king's "coldness." Hereby, the poems focus on Abishag's feelings, Rilke and Csokor's primary theme being King David. Even in his first poems, which appear to deal with Abishag's emotions, Rilke accentuates her passivity and inferiority.

In answering the questions raised at the beginning of the article, we can see that these four authors appear to have been prompted to choose this obscure incident as a way of dealing with the rebellion against patriarchal authority that was felt so keenly within the Wilhelmine period. Their turn to the Hebrew Bible reflected this move not merely substantively but also structurally. The biblical episode—obscure as it had remained prior to their time—engaged upon a theme they recognized and sought to

address in contemporary society. Taking the Bible as their source of inspiration also enabled them to deal with current concerns, providing a context integrally-shaped by intergenerational conflict. Both their choice and their treatment of the biblical text thus reflect not only their literary interests but also contemporary issues.

Appendix 1

Agnes Miegel: "*Abisag von Sunem*"

Sie suchten umher, König Davids Gesind,
Unter Israels Töchtern allen,
An Jehu ben Jakobs einzigem Kind
Fanden sie Wohlgefallen.

Sie führten mich hin in Davids Saal:
„Küsse die Hände dem greisen,
Sitze nieder mit ihm zum Mahl,
Sing ihm die Hirtenweisen!"

König Davids Auge voll Tränen stand
Beim Klange der alten Lieder,
Sein Becher fiel aus der zitternden Hand,
Sein Haupt sank schwer hernieder.

Den bleiernen Schlaf ohne Traumeslust,
Den Schlaf der siebenzig Jahre,
Schlief König David an meiner Brust,
Bedeckt von meinem Haare.

Ich muß in der Säle Dämmerschein
Meine jungen Tage verbringen,
Ich muß den alten König beim Wein
Wie ein Kind in Schlummer singen.

Und muß ihn wärmen in meinem Schoß
Und die dünnen Locken ihm streicheln,
Und mein Blut ist heiß, und mein Haß ist groß,
Mir graut vor seinem Schmeicheln.

Seh ich auch seinem weißen Haar
Israels Königskrone,
Mein ich, sie stünde besser fürwahr
Adonai, seinem Sohne.

Des Haar ist rot, des Haut ist warm,
Des Mund wie Granatenblüten, -
Ihn hielte jauchzend das Weib im Arm
Vom Stamme der Sunemiten.

Appendix 2

Rainer Maria Rilke: "*Abisag*"

I
Sie lag. Und ihre Kinderarme waren
von Dienern um den Welkenden gebunden,
auf dem sie lag die süßen langen Stunden,
ein wenig bang vor seinen vielen Jahren.

Und manchmal wandte sie in seinem Barte
ihr Angesicht, wenn eine Eule schrie;
und alles, was die Nacht war, kam und scharte
mit Bangen und Verlangen sich um sie.

Die Sterne zitterten wie ihresgleichen,
ein Duft ging suchend durch das Schlafgemach,
der Vorhang rührte sich und gab ein Zeichen,
und leise ging ihr Blick dem Zeichen nach –.

Aber sie hielt sich an dem dunkeln Alten
und, von der Nacht der Nächte nicht erreicht,
lag sie auf seinem fürstlichen Erkalten
jungfräulich und wie eine Seele leicht.

II
Der König saß und sann den leeren Tag
getaner Taten, ungefühlter Lüste
und seiner Lieblingshündin, der er pflag –.
Aber am Abend wölbte Abisag
sich über ihm. Sein wirres Leben lag
verlassen wie verrufne Meeresküste
unter dem Sternbild ihrer stillen Brüste.

Und manchmal, als ein Kundiger der Frauen,
erkannte er durch seine Augenbrauen
den unbewegten, küsselosen Mund;
und sah: ihres Gefühles grüne Rute
neigte sich nicht herab zu seinem Grund.
Ihn fröstelte. Er horchte wie ein Hund
Und suchte sich in seinem letzten Blute.

Appendix 3

Franz Theodor Csokor: "*David und Abisag* (*Erstes Buch der Könige, Kapitel 1. 1–4*)"

Ruft sie herbei! Mich friert! Die braune Decke
des hagern Leibes legt mir auf! Mich friert!
Ihr Haar verberge mich wie eine Hecke
vor Einem, der mich immerzu umgiert
höhnisch und siegessicher! – Abisag,
schließ deine Glieder fest um mich, Gazelle,
ich will nichts sehen bis zum fahlen Tag
als deiner Augen felsengraue Quelle!
Dich will ich, dich! – und kann dir doch nichts
geben.
Die Frucht glüht unversehrt, die man mir bot.
Und dennoch bleibst nur du! Mein andres Leben
ist ein Sekundenzählen auf den Tod
und eine Qual: Wer kommt, wenn ich dich
lasse?—
Du schweigst und rankst dich fest an mich wie
Reben
An dürres Holz –
Weißt du, daß ich dich hasse?

Appendix 4

Hedwig Caspari: "*Abisag*"

In den Nächten, da sie bei dem Alten,
Dem Erstarrenden, dem König lag,
Hatte sie so viel in sich verhalten,
So sich aufgespart dem Greisen, Kalten,
Daß sie jetzt aus seines Bettes Falten
Aufstieg, wie ein Brand zum neuen Tag.

Denn sie war wie jung gereifter Wein,
Der in eigner Gärung überstanden.
In ihr quoll Zersetzung wie ein Branden,
Und sie goß sich in das Blut hinein
Aller jener, die von fern ihr nahten,
Bis zu Mord und unerhörten Taten,
Sie der Rausch bezwang;
doch sie blieb rein,

Unbewußt und kindhaft, - blieb die gleiche,
Die sie war, als sie beim Alten ruhte.

Doch da sie vor des Andonia Leiche
Stand; - er lag erstarrt in seinem Blute, -
Zum Verhängnis wurde ihm sein Werben
Und der eigne Bruder zum Verhänger,
Da erschrak sie vor sich selbst. Nicht länger
War sie Glut, die unbewußt entflammte.
Denn was sie entflammte, mußte sterben
An der Unberührtheit ihrer Reife,
Die sich gegen sie verstieß.
Ihr fror.

Und sie litt und sah sich als Verdammte.
Sie verfluchte ihren Leib, den Reife
Schweren Goldes schmückten und bedrückten. -

Und sie dachte jener weit entrückten,
Langen, stummen Nächte, da ihr Ohr
An der Brust des starren Alten lag.
Da sein müdes Herzblut, Schlag auf Schlag,
Einer Ewigkeit entgegenströmte,
Die sie so umfing, daß sie sie hörte.

Sie zerschlug die Brust, und sie empörte
Auf sich gegen Gott, der ihr Umfangen
Nicht so stark gemacht, daß es den Alten
Neu belebte, während sie die Steife
Ihrer Glieder spürte im Erkalten,
Bis zur Ewigkeit sie eingegangen
Ohne Zeit und ohne eigne Reife.

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