



The Books of Samuel

Bathsheba

After David and Goliath, probably the most famous story about David is his affair with Bathsheba, the beautiful woman he sees bathing on the roof. This episode, in 2 Samuel 11–12, marks a significant pivot in David's life: his rocket-like rise to power is interrupted by his most flagrant abuse of that power, and his reign is never the same again.

The story begins by setting us in the time of the year when kings typically go out to battle, which is to say, the spring, after the rainy season has passed. David, however, does not go to war, but stays at home, letting his general Joab go and fight the Ammonites on his behalf. In his free time, with his warriors all off at battle, David happens to be wandering on his roof, surveying his city, when he sees a woman bathing. This is no innocuous detail: bathing was not just for cleanliness, but for purification. Women would bathe upon the conclusion of their seven-day purification period following menstruation. This ritual bath marked the beginning of a woman's period of highest fertility. Thus, when David sends for her and sleeps with her, we are already on notice that she is likely to have become pregnant from the encounter.

When David is informed that Bathsheba is pregnant, he sends for her husband, Uriah— who is one of David's chief warriors, and is fighting alongside Joab in Ammon. David invites him to the palace, where the king instructs the soldier to "go down to your house and wash your feet" (11:8). Washing the feet is a well-known euphemism for having sex; thus, David here is encouraging Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba, in the hopes that her pregnancy will be attributed to her husband, rather than to the adulterous king. Had Uriah followed David's instructions, no one would have known that the child was David's, and his affair with Bathsheba would have been a one-time event of no consequence. But Uriah, it turns out, is far nobler than David: he refuses to go to his home: "The Ark and Israel and Judah are located at Succoth, and my master Joab and your majesty's men are camped in the open; how can I go home and eat and drink and sleep with my wife?" Despite repeated efforts on David's part, Uriah maintains his stance, and avoids Bathsheba entirely. We can see that Uriah here is being presented as a foil to David. While David stays home from war and sleeps with whomever he likes, Uriah abstains from sex even with his wife, desiring only to be where his fellow soldiers are.

David then decides that the only course of action is to have Uriah killed. He sends Uriah back to the battlefield with a message for Joab, instructing Joab to put Uriah in the front lines during an assault, then have the army fall back and leave Uriah exposed. (That is, Uriah carries his own death sentence with him, an aspect of the story that only highlights David's brutality.) This is

indeed what happens, and when the messenger returns with the news that some men, including Uriah, had been killed, David's response is heartless: "The sword consumes this one and that one." In other words, David was willing to let innocent men die in order to cover up his ordered murder of Uriah, yet another innocent man.

David takes Bathsheba into his palace and makes her his wife—one of his many wives, not counting his many concubines as well. She then bears David a son, which precipitates the arrival of the prophet Nathan to teach David a well-deserved lesson. He tells David the parable of the poor man and his beloved lamb, which is stolen from him by a rich man who had no need of it. Among the most famous lines from the David story is the one that Nathan the prophet delivers upon the conclusion of his parable of the poor man's lamb. Having convinced David that the rich man in the parable should be punished for his treatment of the poor man, Nathan rounds on David: "You are the man!" (12:7). It is an interesting aspect of David's character that while the Bible goes to great lengths to exculpate him from blame in so many moments, he is equally unable to recognize when he has actually done something wrong. Repeatedly, and most prominently in this case, David has to think that the story is about someone else before he is able to see where the fault lies. He learns his lessons only in parables.

The parable is followed by the oracle of punishment that Nathan levels against David. Because David evidently thought that everything he had—everything that God had given him— was not enough, God will take away what he had once given. "I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes" (12:11). David recognizes his guilt—"I stand guilty before the Lord!" (12:13)—and Nathan tells David that the king himself will not die as punishment for his crimes. Rather, the child that Bathsheba bore will die in David's place.

Embedded in this prophecy is a recognition of the course of historical events: David, despite what he did with Bathsheba and to Uriah, did not die immediately afterward, or even for a long time afterward. Yet the biblical concept of "eye for an eye" demands that someone die for the murder of Uriah. Perhaps the Bible invokes here the well-established concept of transgenerational punishment here: that the sins of the fathers are imposed on the sons, a longstanding mechanism for explaining how, on the one hand, those that sin seem to live long and fruitful lives, while those who seem innocent are afflicted for no apparent reason. Whatever the case, there is a definitive moral quandary presented by this story: we must reckon with the death of a complete innocent, a child too young even to be named.

The moral problem here is somewhat mitigated in the text by the remarkable period of mourning that David undertakes: not after the child has died, but while the child is still alive. David fasts for seven days in the hope of persuading God to relent, but to no avail. When the child does actually die, David does the opposite of what is expected: he gets up, bathes, anoints himself, changes his clothes, and proceeds to begin eating again. He explains to his servants the reason for his strange behavior: "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought, 'Who knows? The Lord may have pity on me, and the child may live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me." This is one of the most heart-rending passages in the entire Bible, and an acute description of the suffering endured by those who experience the sickness and death of a child. Yet underlying it is the recognition that the child did not deserve to die at all. It is hard to avoid

the image here of a vengeful and capricious deity, one who exhibits as little regard for innocent life in punishment as David did in the original commission of the instigating sin.

Before Nathan's arrival, the story seems to be intended to explain the paternity of Bathsheba's child. Indeed, all the emphasis to this point is on how the child could in no way be Uriah's. We might expect, then, that this is the birth story of Solomon, for whom, more than perhaps anyone else, authenticating his Davidic paternity would be an important issue. Yet it turns out that this is not the case at all. After the unnamed child dies, as Nathan foretold, David and Bathsheba have a second child: this is Solomon. His birth is narrated in a single verse (12:24). He will disappear from the story entirely, along with Bathsheba and Nathan, until the beginning of the book of Kings.

There is something suspicious about this, which has led some scholars to argue that what we have here is a story in two layers: one in which there was but one child born to Bathsheba, and one who lived: Solomon. This would account for the emphasis on paternity, which is, after all, a concern for the dynastic lineage. This original tale would have jumped directly from David taking Bathsheba into his palace at the end of chapter 11 to the notice of Solomon's birth in the second half of 12:24: "She bore a son and she named him Solomon." The parable of Nathan and the death of the first child (and the introduction of the idea of a second son) would have been added later, perhaps as a means of explaining how it was that David could have simply gotten away with such a hideous crime, perhaps to justify the subsequent revolt of Absalom and decline of David's power, and perhaps to further ensure that there could be no doubt about Solomon's paternity: if he is the second son, he is absolutely David's.

As with some other parts of the David story we have discussed to this point, the criterion of embarrassment may be applied here. We can once again ask the question: if an author were inventing the David story altogether, would this episode be in it? Surely not. Indeed, we have at our disposal something quite close to proof along these lines. At the end of the fifth century BCE, the book of Chronicles was written. Some six hundred years after David lived; the authors of Chronicles were under no constraints to tell the story of David in accord with what actually happened, or in response to what any of David's contemporaries were saying about the king. They had complete freedom to write the David story as they saw fit, to extol David as a nearly perfect king. And thus, we should not be surprised that, according to Chronicles, the Bathsheba affair never happened. In 1 Chronicles 20, we see the almost verbatim repetition of the beginning of the Bathsheba story: the notice that at the time when kings typically go out to battle, David stayed home while Joab went to fight for him (1 Chr 20:1). What follows is not the Bathsheba story, however—the narrative jumps right to the end of 2 Samuel 12, to the defeat of Ammon and David's seizing of the crown of the Ammonite king (1 Chr 20:1–2//2 Sam 12:26–30). In fact, Chronicles tells none of the potentially embarrassing aspects of the David story: there is no flight from Saul, no time in the wilderness, no Nabal and Abigail, no service to the Philistines. There is no Goliath story either, nor any war against the descendants of Saul. Chronicles presents a whitewashed David, a perfected David. This is what it looks like when an author is not beholden to certain evidently well-known facts about David. In contrast, we can see how the authors of the books of Samuel are forced to admit certain facts about David, while simultaneously trying to spin them in David's favor.

The Bathsheba episode is unique in the David story. Although many people die around David, as we have seen, he is never held responsible for any of their deaths—except for Uriah’s. And although every single one of those deaths materially benefits David in his quest for power, Uriah’s is the prominent exception. It is this combination of unusual responsibility and purely personal agenda that makes the story so resonant. What we see here is a king at the very height of his power falling into the all too frequent trap of abusing that power for his own desires. In modern America, this trope is immediately recognizable, in the easy examples of Presidents Kennedy and Clinton, and so many others.

For many readers over the millennia, the Bathsheba episode has served to humanize David, to make him, if not a role model, then at least a biblical figure with identifiably human tendencies and faults. There is some irony in this: the rest of the biblical account of David seems to try quite strenuously to make it clear that David did not in fact have such faults, not even the fault of ambition. Yet here David is undoubtedly to blame. This is the only moment when God directly castigates David for his actions. And it marks the beginning of David’s slow decline. As Nathan says, “The sword shall never depart from your house” (12:10). From this point forward, David will not sit peacefully on the throne but will have to fight to maintain it with all of his power.

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