

## Taking Another Look at Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2-5)

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David saw the wife of Uriah washing herself and took another look at her. So have we. So does Twitter every four to six months or so. Again and again, we are drawn to this story like a moth to the flame. Over and over, we characterize and mischaracterize her. When we do, we unveil our assumptions about men and women—how things are and how things should be. In the summer of 2022, when David and Bathsheba were trending yet again on Twitter, I wrote a long thread attempting to shed some light on the subject. It went viral, resulting in radio and podcast interviews, an article for *CT*, and now this ETS paper. I'm inviting us to take another look—first at the interpreters who have vilified or vindicated Bathsheba, and then at the biblical account in hopes that this time, we'll get the story right.

### Gaps in the Biblical Account

Part of the genius of 2 Samuel 11 is its laconic style. As Sternberg says, “Biblical narratives are notorious for their sparsity of detail. Yet our chapter—especially because it leaves mental states and causes and processes opaque—is frugal to excess even relative to the biblical norm.”<sup>1</sup> By leaving gaps in the story that veil each character's motivations or reactions, the narrator entices readers to fill those gaps with our best guesses.

When our assumptions turn out to be mismatched with subsequent plot developments, we are required to take another look, rereading the story with other possibilities in mind. Gaps are the genius of this story, and the reason we so often disagree about what it says.

- Was David expected to stay home from the battlefield?<sup>2</sup> Or does it point to a character flaw?
- Why is David getting up from his bed in the evening? Has he been lazing around or is this a normal siesta?
- Why is the woman washing herself where she can be seen? Is this intentional or accidental? Does she have other options?
- Is she on the roof? In a courtyard? In her house? Where do women normally bathe? Is she naked?
- To whom does David inquire about her? And whose voice announces her identity? Could it be David's, musing over her identity and plotting against Uriah?

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<sup>1</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, The Indiana Literary Biblical Series (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 191.

<sup>2</sup> The text critical question hovers behind this one. Is it the time when “kings” or “messengers” go off to war? Koenig opts for “kings” because it highlights the “motivational gap.” Sara M. Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba? A Study in Characterization*, PTMS (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 32. It's also possible that the ambiguity is intentional. That is, it's the time when “kings” go off to war, but David sends “messengers” instead.

- Is this Eliam the father of David's advisor, Ahithophel?
- Did David already know her, given her relation to two of David's elite fighters?
- Does Bathsheba come willingly? Does she protest? Does she know why David is sending for her? Is this what she wants?
- Why does the narrator wait to tell us that she was performing a ritual cleansing after menstruation until after her encounter with David? Why is Bathsheba concerned with ritual purity when her husband is away?
- Does Bathsheba's return home indicate her disgust at what has happened to her? Or David's disregard for her now that he has used her?
- What is Bathsheba's motivation in telling David she is pregnant? Is it celebratory? Terrified? What does she expect David to do about it? Does she face stoning if her husband returns to a pregnant wife?
- What is David's motivation in sending for Uriah? Does he intend for Uriah to sleep with his wife? Or for Bathsheba to report to him what happened to her? Or to flaunt what he has done? Is this a power play or an act of contrition?
- Is "wash your feet" a euphemism? Why doesn't David have Uriah's feet washed as an act of hospitality when Uriah arrives from the battlefield?
- Why does David send a gift for Uriah? Is it a penance? A mood-maker? An excuse to spy on his behavior and make sure he goes home?
- Does Uriah know why David sent for him?
- When Uriah laid down with the servants at the gate, did they tell him the palace gossip about his wife's coming and going? Did he stay with men who had passed messages about her?
- Who told David that Uriah didn't go home, and what was their purpose in doing so?
- When David confronted Uriah, did Uriah know why David wanted him to go home? And did David know that Uriah knew? And did Uriah know that David knew that he knew? Or was Uriah naïve of David's machinations and simply answered honestly?
- Did Uriah think that the invitation to go home to his wife was a test, given David's policy of prohibiting sexual contact during war? Did Uriah think he was passing that test? Or did he know why David wanted him to go home, so his answer was defiant, seeking to expose David's duplicity?
- What did Uriah do all the next day while he waited for David to send him back to battle?
- Did Uriah know that he carried his death sentence back to the front?
- Did Joab suspect the reason David wanted Uriah killed? Did it bother him to carry out this order?
- Did the messenger find Joab's message to David suspicious? Why did Joab imagine such a specific response from David? Was it his way of acknowledging the terrible military strategy he employed in that incident? Was he signaling to the messenger that he wasn't as dumb as he seemed and exposing David's strange way of processing the event?
- Why did the messenger improvise, offering another explanation of the battle?

- Does David's response make the messenger suspicious of David's intentions toward Uriah?
- Was David's lack of lament over the death of Uriah suspicious to others?
- How long did Uriah's wife mourn his passing? Was her grief genuine or contrived? Was she glad when David brought her to the palace to become his wife? Or did it disgust her to be forced to marry the man who stole her?
- Did everyone know that Bathsheba was pregnant with David's son? Or had rumors not spread? David's servants do not seem to understand his distress over the child's sickness. Why was David so distressed over her child? Does this imply that from the beginning he wanted Bathsheba to bear his successor?
- Did Nathan know about Uriah and Bathsheba because of palace gossip? Or did YHWH reveal it to him supernaturally?
- Is Uriah the traveler in Nathan's parable?
- What does David's servants think that he will do when he finds out the child is dead? Self-harm? Or harm to others?
- Why is this entire episode sandwiched in the story of a battle against the Ammonites?

Meir Sternberg's *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* is the classic text that surveys the function of gaps in biblical narrative and the effects they have on readers. He says,

From the viewpoint of what is directly given in the language, the literary work consists of bits and fragments to be linked and pieced together in the process of reading: It establishes a system of gaps that must be filled in. This gap-filling ranges from simple linkages of elements, which the reader performs automatically, to intricate networks that are figured out consciously, laboriously, hesitantly, and with constant modifications in the light of additional information disclosed in later stages of reading.<sup>3</sup>

Because others have already carefully exegeted 2 Samuel 11, I have focused my efforts on surveying the history of interpretation of this passage. I am especially interested in how readers fill in the gaps—what assumptions they make. A presentation of this length cannot explore all the questions that arise from gaps in the 2 Samuel 11-12. We'll focus primarily on 11:2-5, which sparsely narrates David's sexual encounter with Bathsheba. These verses are not the primary focus of the account, as David Firth and Gale Yee have both ably demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> The summary fashion in which the encounter is narrated signals it is background information. The story is ultimately about the showdown between David and Uriah at the heart of the battle against the Ammonites. We can discern this from the much fuller presentation of these men's dialogue and movements. However, on *first* reading the story seems to be about a sexual encounter with Uriah's wife.

Lack of attention to detail can result in a mischaracterization of participants in the story. Sternberg explains that "Illegitimate gap-filling is one launched and sustained by the reader's subjective concerns (or dictated by more general preconceptions) rather than by the text's own

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<sup>3</sup> Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Firth 2008, Yee 247

norms and directives.”<sup>5</sup> These verses function as a Rorschach test that reveals the interpreter’s perceptions, motivations, and tendencies by how the interpreter fills the gaps of the text.<sup>6</sup> The text is so laconic that readers are required to supply, as Sternberg puts it, “basic assumptions or general canons of probability derived from ‘everyday life’ and prevalent cultural conventions” (189). To the degree that we know the ancient culture and understand its conventions, these efforts to fill the gaps may be legitimate. To the degree that we are unfamiliar or inattentive to the details of the plot, we expose the perspectives we bring with us to the text. In the case of Bathsheba, so many readers jump to unwarranted conclusions by inexpertly filling in the gaps.

### **Bathsheba, the Seductress?**

Interpretations of Bathsheba tend to fall in two categories: those who pass blame on her and those who do not. But a few notable exceptions complicate this picture. For example, Cassiodorus assumes that Bathsheba bathed in the brook of the Kidron valley and that she “deserved to attain the royal embraces.” He sees her as a type of the church, to be united to Christ/David.<sup>7</sup> This unabashedly positive re-reading of the entire episode runs roughshod over every indication the text offers that David sinned egregiously by taking her by suggesting that Bathsheba did well in marrying up.

Some approaches to this story primarily seek to vindicate David without passing blame on Bathsheba. Rabbinic interpretations are notably creative, suggesting that “David did *not* commit adultery, because Uriah had divorced Bathsheba before leaving for the front line.”<sup>8</sup> This approach attempts to resolve an apparent contradiction between David’s anointing as king and his inspired psalms on the one hand, and his behavior with Bathsheba on the other. However, this absurd argument from silence creates more contradictions because it ignores the fact that the narrator and the prophet Nathan both pin the blame squarely on David, saying explicitly that David had taken Uriah’s wife as his own (2 Sam. 12:9), and he accepts it.

Similarly, in a recent conversation on the app formerly known as Twitter, one gentleman said of Bathsheba, “the concept of women ‘trading up’ is a very real thing.” He went on to argue that Uriah and Bathsheba were not technically married because she hadn’t borne him any children yet. To him, that meant “she was not married in the eyes of God.”

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<sup>5</sup> Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 188.

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rorschach\\_test#:~:text=The%20Rorschach%20test%20is%20a,D012392](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rorschach_test#:~:text=The%20Rorschach%20test%20is%20a,D012392)

<sup>7</sup> *Exposition of the Psalms* 50 (51).1-2. ACW 51.493. ACCS OT IV, 355.

<sup>8</sup> Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 188. He offers an example from *Shabbat* 56a.



### *Blaming Bathsheba*

No one puts the entire blame on Bathsheba for what happened, but many focus on her faults. I've arranged these examples in chronological order.

**Matthew Henry (1710)** says although Bathsheba was "a lady of good reputation," she was "too easily consenting, because he was a great man." Henry presumes that David had promised to protect Bathsheba from legal consequences, which persuaded her to consent to the deed. Henry concludes, "Hope of impunity is a great encouragement to iniquity." Her mourning for her dead husband was only "as short a time as custom would admit." Later he says, "Bathsheba, no doubt, was greatly afflicted with the sense of her sin and the tokens of God's displeasure."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Unabridged., 6 vols. (N.P.: Bible Study Steps, 2020).

**Adam Clarke (1810-25)** vacillates between the suggestion that Bathsheba wanted to be seen and that she could have been blameless. He asks, “How could any woman of delicacy expose herself where she could be so fully and openly viewed?”<sup>10</sup> He notes that Bengali women bathe in public, so this might have been normal behavior. However, he later concludes that “*Bath-sheba* was probably *first* in the transgression, by a too public display of her charms; by which, accidentally, the heart of David was affected, wounded, and blinded.”<sup>11</sup> He refers to her “iniquity,” her “lightness and conjugal infidelity,” and says “I...*think meanly* of Bath-sheba.”<sup>12</sup> He also supposes that her mourning was perfunctory, saying “The whole of her conduct indicates that she observed the *form* without feeling the *power* of *sorrow*. . . . therefore . . . ‘she shed reluctant tears, and forced our groans from a joyful heart.’”<sup>13</sup>

**Keil and Delitzsche (1860s or 70s)** say that “Bathsheba is not to be regarded as free from blame” (383) because “she did not shrink from committing the sin of adultery” (384) and because “there is no intimation whatever that David brought Bathsheba into his palace through craft or violence, but rather that she came at his request without any hesitation, and offered no resistance to his desires” (383). Still, the “greatest guilt rests upon David” (383).

**Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg (OTL, 1964)** speaks of Bathsheba’s “feminine flirtation,” suggesting that she bathed in view on purpose (309). Although he notes that the narrator only blames David for the incident, Hertzberg must feel that perspective needs supplementation. He says, “We learn nothing of Bathsheba’s feelings; her consciousness of the danger into which adultery was leading her (Deut. 22:22) must have been outweighed by her realization of the honour of having attracted the king” (310).

**Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War* (1990),** insists that based on the grammar, Bathsheba is “a willing and equal partner to the events that transpire” (88). He calls the incident “adultery” (83), suggesting that “Bathsheba’s bathing in a location which is observable from the palace may be viewed as part of an attempt at improving status” (89).

**Adele Berlin (1994),** speaks of Bathsheba as a “naked beauty” . . . “who has had an adulterous affair, become pregnant, lost her husband, married her lover, the king of Israel, and borne his child!” (*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 26).

**Robert Alter (2000)** calls Bathsheba’s behavior a betrayal to her husband (*The David Story*, 182). He considers whether the sentence about Bathsheba in v. 4 is “intimating an element of active participation by Bathsheba in David’s sexual summons,” and goes so far as to consider that her going to the palace is “opportunism,” considering her political savviness in 1 Kings 1-2 (2:347).

In a 2009 sermon, **John MacArthur** said, “Bathsheba was not innocent in the situation. She put herself in a position to be seen by the king from the top of his palace. She was

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, 6 vols. (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1810), 2:334.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, 2:337.

<sup>12</sup> Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, 2:337.

<sup>13</sup> Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, 2:336.

sunbathing, as it were, on her own roof. I don't think she was innocent at all in what she was doing, and David certainly was not innocent."<sup>14</sup>

The amount of speculation in these gap-filling interpretations is sometimes staggering. **Richards and O'Brien (2012)**, in their book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, say that "women (then or now) don't bathe in places where they could be seen publicly. . . [and] it is likely it was dark and therefore Bathsheba had provided sufficient lighting—sufficient for bathing and sufficient for being seen while bathing." (121) I don't think they intended to provide an example of their own "misreading with Western eyes," but undoubtedly, they did.

### *Chiding Bathsheba*

A few interpreters stop short of blaming Bathsheba entirely but still give her a talking to. **Alonso Tostado**, a Spanish Catholic bishop and lecturer, from the early **1400s**, considers whether Bathsheba sinned by bathing where she could be seen. While he stops short of claiming that she *wanted* to be seen, he upbraids her for being "too incautious" in her nudity "making herself bare in such a place where many could be scandalized."<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, **John Calvin (1562)** says, "Bathsheba . . . is not to be condemned because she bathed. But she should have exercised discretion, so as not to be seen. For a chaste and upright woman will not show herself in such a way as to allure men" (*Sermons on 2 Samuel* (1:481-82; RCS 193).

**Matthew Poole (1683-85)** chastises Bathsheba for her carelessness in washing herself in a garden or in a room where she left the windows open.<sup>16</sup>

### *Sending Mixed Messages*<sup>17</sup>

Some interpreters speak out of both sides of their mouth. **Paul S. Evans**, *1-2 Samuel* (Story of God, **2018**) claims twice that Bathsheba was "bathing on a nearby rooftop" (386, cf. 395), referring to the incident as "adultery" (388) and an "affair" (393). Evans then absolves Bathsheba, saying "What choice did she have? He was in a position of power and she a lowly woman" (390), but still calls it an "adulterous tryst" (390).

In his commentary, **V. Phillips Long** (TOTC, **2020**) calls this incident "adultery" but also notes "David's abusive treatment of Bathsheba and Uriah" (45? Online).

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<sup>14</sup> (Oct 18, 2009, "The Believer's Confession of Sin"; <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-353/the-believers-confession-of-sin>)

<sup>15</sup> (*Commentary on 2 Samuel* (TO 13:101-2, RCS 193).

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (London: Banner of Truth, 1962), 1:606.

<sup>17</sup> Gregor Andersson (2009) calls the incident adultery and concludes that "David wants Uriah to have sex with Bathsheba so that he, and others, will believe that she is carrying Uriah's child" (94). He astutely notes the purpose of Nathan's fable, saying, "what are really put to the test are the man's moral intuitions: are they still sane, or is he totally corrupted after his foul deed?" (114)

## *Vindicating Bathsheba*

A handful of modern interpreters fully exonerates Bathsheba. **J. P. Fokkelman (1981)** insists that the whole section revolves around the tension between the war scenes and the scenes at the palace. David's position on the roof makes him "a despot who is able to survey and choose as he pleases" (51). Bathsheba's cleansing provides a contrast between her [ritual] purity and David's [moral] impurity (52).<sup>18</sup>

**Joyce Baldwin (TOTC, 1988)** says David "overrides her personal feelings in the matter by sending messengers to take her" (232). Baldwin characterizes the events that follow as a cover-up, an "attempt to screen himself from exposure" (233).

**Mary J. Evans (NIBC, 2000)** notes the power dynamics and insist that "although the case against Bathsheba is unproven, the case against David is clear, and later David takes full responsibility for his sin (12:13)" (182). She calls it "adultery" (187), but says it is "unlikely that she was bathing in the seductive manner assumed in some paintings. She may not even have been naked" (188). David "behaved as if he was above the law" and the story is designed to show "that it is unacceptable to God for power to be abused in this way" (183). "The balance of probability seems to lie with Bathsheba's innocence" given the difficulty of refusing the king (188). By refusing to name Bathsheba in this passage, but rather calling her the "woman" or "wife of Uriah," "the writers present this not as a great romance but as a rather seedy action on David's part" (188).

**Richard M. Davidson (2006)** presents a lengthy case for Bathsheba's innocence, listing eighteen textual and archaeological elements that point to the conclusion that "Bathsheba was a victim of 'power rape' on the part of David" (82).<sup>19</sup> **Ronald F. Youngblood** cites Davidson approvingly in his **2017** Expositor's Bible Commentary.

**Chloe Sun (2010)** says that in the biblical narrative, Bathsheba is "portrayed as a victim at the whim of David's lust and power," in a "marginal position" because of her marriage to a Hittite (32). She started out passive but gradually found her voice and advocated for herself in 1 Kings.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Fokkelman sees the summons of Uriah as a "cover-up" operation (53). Fokkelman brilliantly evaluates Joab's report to David by identifying a chiasm whose central element is the method by which Abimelech was killed. The upshot of his report to David does like this: "if you draw too near to a fortress wall, you not only expose yourself to a shower of arrows but also give a woman the chance to put you out of commission in a very stupid manner! Haven't you made the same kind of blunder as Abimelech?" (67) In this way, Joab's anger regarding the situation is made plain, even though the speech is never fully delivered.

<sup>19</sup> Richard M. Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17/2 (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Sun, Chloe T. "Bathsheba Transformed: From Silence to Voice." Pages 30–42 in *Mirrored Reflections: Reframing Biblical Characters*. Edited by Young Lee Hertig and Chloe T. Sun. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010.

**Sara Koenig (2011)** notes that in Nathan's parable "no blame [is] ascribed to the lamb for tempting the rich man to take her" (68). Furthermore, the word for "purifying" in 11:4 has positive connotations elsewhere (47).

**Keith Bodner (2014)** considers whether "David himself asks the question" in v. 3: "Is this not Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite?"<sup>21</sup> Bodner notes Bathsheba's "politically connected family" and points to the "profoundly self-destructive" behavior into which David slides (28). Although he uses the word "adultery" to describe the encounter, he does not attach any blame to Bathsheba.

**Bodner and Johnson (2020)** note that "The David the reader sees will depend on the decisions about what one is willing to look at and what questions one is willing to entertain" (122).

In a 2015 online article for *Christianity Today*, **David Lamb** calls it rape and says "we soften the story by reducing the affair to consensual adultery." He notes that the text doesn't say she was naked or that she knew he was watching her. He denies that she could have resisted.<sup>22</sup>

Also in 2015, **David H. Jensen** writes, "There is no seduction here, no romance, no reciprocity between man and woman... The language that conveys the episode is more akin to rape than seduction." (Belief 216)

**Wilda Gafney (2017)** observes "David's ability to view her body is attributed to the size and position of the royal residence and not to any temptation or solicitation on her part" (212). She insists that "to come when beckoned by the king does not imply consent" (214).

**John Piper (2022)** is an unlikely ally who says that Bathsheba was not complicit. In a Q&A session in which someone asked him about this incident, Piper said: "Yes, I think there are pointers that David exerted a kind of pressure on her to warrant the accusation of rape, and I don't say that because I think the act couldn't be consensual given the power dynamics at play... It is possible for a woman to be sinfully complicit in committing adultery with a very powerful man. I don't see any evidence for that in this text." According to an article in Churchleaders.com, "Piper went on to explain that the biblical narrative doesn't use any language of wooing or seducing. It simply says that David "took" Bathsheba."<sup>23</sup>

**Lynn Japinga (2023)** notes that "Nothing is said about what Bathsheba wanted" (109). Her desires are beside the point of the story. "Some preachers and commentators tell the story in ways that make David appear less heinous. One strategy is to blame Bathsheba. David is portrayed as a virile, handsome, desirable man whose only flaw was that women found him irresistible" (110). Japinga agrees that adultery implies consent and that this is a rape made possible by David's abuse of power (111). "David's moral vision had been clouded by his power and position" (112).

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<sup>21</sup> Page 27. Cf. Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?*, 42; Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12*, vol. 75 of *The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2009), 85.

<sup>22</sup> (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/october-web-only/david-was-rapist-abraham-was-sex-trafficker.html>)

<sup>23</sup> ([https://churchleaders.com/news/415702-did-david-rape-bathsheba-john-piper-weighs-in.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawEX2DJleHRuA2FlbQlXMAABHYX5IJuHfTLmrr2fxiLsm7Kanzkykj66aIwF8SL8AYNHW1PYNJEw1VGqScQ\\_aem\\_N2vKAENQNVFPtgDiCZ1tCQ](https://churchleaders.com/news/415702-did-david-rape-bathsheba-john-piper-weighs-in.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawEX2DJleHRuA2FlbQlXMAABHYX5IJuHfTLmrr2fxiLsm7Kanzkykj66aIwF8SL8AYNHW1PYNJEw1VGqScQ_aem_N2vKAENQNVFPtgDiCZ1tCQ))

**Jack Vogt (2024)** notes that Bathsheba is “doing what the law prescribed,” which tells readers she is faithful and Torah observant and “has no option but to do what David says” (75). Vogt suggests that we should consider David’s palace like the “open field” of Deut. 22:22-27, in which if she cried out, she would not be rescued (78). He concludes, “I think we need to see both Bathsheba and Uriah as godly people who cannot be blamed for any part of what David did” (85).

### Taking Another Look at Bathsheba

Getting the story right involves astutely filling the gaps of the text. Sternberg insists that the process of gap-filling “is not automatic but requires considerable attention to the nuances of the text, both at the level of the represented events and at the level of language.”<sup>24</sup>

#### *Where was Bathsheba?*

One detail of the story is routinely misconstrued. Thanks in part to the song by Leonard Cohen and to many artistic depictions of the scene, interpreters tend to say that Bathsheba was bathing *on the roof*. V. Phillips Long (TOTC 2020) tries to defend this grammatically, saying that according to Williams’ syntax (2007, section 323a), the sentence could read “he saw a woman washing on the roof” (48). However, Williams does not list this passage as an example of a grammatical construction in which the *m* is locative. The most natural reading of the Hebrew text, given the use of the identical phrase in the previous line identifying David’s location, is that *David* is on the roof, which afforded him a view of her. The Hebrew of 2 Sam 11:2 reads:

|                                           |                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| וַיְהִי לַעֲתֵּה עֶרֶב                    | Now it happened at evening time,                             |
| וַיָּקָם דָּוִד מֵעַל מִשְׁכְּבוֹ         | That David arose from upon his bed,                          |
| וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ עַל-גֹּגֶן בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ | And he wandered about upon the roof of the house of the king |
| וַיִּרְאֵה אִשָּׁה רֹחֶצֶת מֵעַל הַגֹּגֶן | And he saw a woman washing from upon the roof                |
| וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מְרָאָה מְאֹד:         | And the woman was extremely good in appearance.              |

Sara Koenig argues that the grammar clearly identifies David as the one on the roof because the phrase “from atop the roof” (מֵעַל הַגֹּגֶן; 2 Sam. 11:2) mirrors the use of the same preposition in 11:20-21 to describe the location of the archers in the battle (35). However, many interpreters persist in locating Bathsheba on the roof. Among those who assume that Bathsheba is on the roof are Robert Alter, Bill Arnold, David Firth, John MacArthur, Paul Evans (386, 395), and Bishop Robert Barron (99).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 191–92.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 76; Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 2:346; B. T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 526; David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, AOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 417.

The inattention of these exegetes to the details of the Hebrew text is concerning, especially when Bathsheba's reputation as a seductress is often connected to this imagined behavior. Now, given the architecture of the city of David, in which houses were smashed up against each other with shared walls and no courtyards, it does seem possible that Bathsheba was also on the roof. However, the text does not tell us so. Rooftops were part of the living space of every Israelite home, an ideal place to work or rest, especially in the cool of the evening.

### *What was Bathsheba doing?*

**Keil & Delitzche (1860s or 70s)** suggested that Bathsheba was bathing "in the uncovered court of a neighboring house, where there was a spring with a pool of water, such as you still frequently meet with in the East" (383). This points to how little was known in his day about the geography and archaeology of Jerusalem (though even from the biblical text itself we can conclude that there was no water source inside the city). The city of David appears to have been too crowded for courtyards, and in any case, we know with certainty that there were no springs inside the city walls. It was built on bedrock. That is why Hezekiah sponsored the construction of a tunnel to carry water to the pool of Siloam. Otherwise, they would have quickly perished under siege.

Any water Bathsheba used to wash herself would have to have been carried from outside the city walls, from the Gihon Spring. This makes it highly unlikely that she or her servants had filled an entire bathtub and that she was enjoying a leisurely soak in full view of the king. It is far more likely that she used a jar of water for a sponge bath of sorts. Anyone who has gone camping without running water knows that it is possible to wash up without entirely undressing. And those who have lived in the developing world, as I have, have probably witnessed public bathing in communities that lack indoor plumbing. That David sexualizes this ordinary act is his problem, not hers.

Bathsheba is a 'flat' character, an agent in the story with little said about her character. The one thing we know is that she obeys the law of Moses. The text explicitly tells us in v. 5 that Bathsheba was ritually purifying herself from her monthly menstruation in accordance with Levitical law (Lev. 15). This tells us two important things about her: (1) she is Torah observant, even when her husband is out of town. (2) She is not already pregnant when David calls for her. That means David is responsible for her subsequent pregnancy.

### *What was Bathsheba wearing?*

Another assumption of interpreters is that Bathsheba was naked. As I've already noted, the text says no such thing. Those of us with the luxury of indoor plumbing, drainage, and doors can bathe naked in privacy. In many parts of the world that lack such amenities, bathing is naturally done at the water source while partially covered. No water source existed inside the city of David. All water had to be drawn and carried from the Gihon Spring outside the city walls. An alternative would be to wash near the spring, which David could likely see from his palace.

Among those interpreters who assume Bathsheba was naked (along with virtually every artist who depicts this event on canvas), are Adele Berlin, Ronald Youngblood (EBC), David

Tsumura (177-78), and again, Bishop Robert Barron (98).<sup>26</sup> Barron avers, “It would be naïve in the extreme to construe Bathsheba as totally innocent—she just happens to be bathing nude within easy eyeshot of the king?” Call me naïve, but I think we should not make assumptions unwarranted by the text or by the archaeology of the story’s setting. Barron’s willingness to place blame on Bathsheba goes beyond the narrator’s assessment of the situation, the prophet’s assessment of the situation, and David’s own assessment. All three of these point to David and David alone as responsible for grievous sin.

Ultimately, it matters little whether Bathsheba was wearing anything at all. David’s summons and his subsequent murder of her husband make her the clear victim of the narrative. Even a naked woman cannot be blamed for a man violating her. If she was bathing in public, then her act was not sexual. If she was bathing in private, then David’s gaze intrudes on her privacy.

Nakedness *does* play a role in the wider story, when David’s men are shamed by the king of Ammon, who shaves off half their beards and cuts off their clothing at the waist so that their buttocks were exposed (2 Sam. 10:4). David quickly shows compassion to his men by giving them time to let their beards grow before they returned home. The Ammonite act of aggression is what provoked the war David’s men were fighting while he remained at home. By the end of the tale, we’ve begun to share the Ammonite suspicion of David’s motives when he sends messengers, haven’t we?

#### *Why didn’t Bathsheba resist?*

To ask this question betrays a certain naivete about power dynamics and about ancient Israelite culture. Bathsheba’s husband was an elite fighter in David’s army. He was a man under orders, who obeyed even unto death. That was his job. Bathsheba’s father was also one of David’s mighty men. This tells us that Bathsheba’s entire life has revolved around serving the king. The men in her life were at his beck and call. The text does not indicate that the messengers who arrived at her home told her why David had summoned her. In that context, resistance would be futile (just ask Tamar, who attempts to resist her brother’s sexual advances in the next story).

To whom would Bathsheba appeal if she wanted to lodge a formal complaint against the king? Every member of the government had sworn allegiance to the king. He was their boss. If they crossed him, then their head would appear next on the chopping block. The same language used of Bathsheba’s coming to David is used of Uriah as he comes from the battle in response to David’s summons. Uriah’s refusal to go home makes him a dead man.

It seems to me that reading with Western ideas of individual autonomy may color the way we fill gaps. It’s hard to imagine any ancient Israelite refusing to go with the king’s messengers, especially when the purpose of the meeting is unspecified.

A few months ago, I received an email from one of Tim Tebow’s staff members, saying that Timmy wanted to meet with me on Zoom. No one in grad school told me that things like this

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<sup>26</sup> Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature Series 9 (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 26.

would happen. Why did the former Heisman trophy winner and famous evangelical icon want to meet with me? To talk about theology. He wanted my advice on a book project and help ensuring that his speeches at his annual Night to Shine events were biblically accurate. I said yes, of course. When powerful people request a moment of our time, we drop everything to accommodate their schedules, don't we, even if we have no personal connection with them.

A better example is my Dean. When Dr. Ed Stetzer, calls me at home, I answer the phone. Not only is he a famous evangelical (with over 260k Twitter followers), but he's a force of nature, and he's my Dean. Although he follows over 200k people on Twitter, he manages to see everything I say online. During the 2020 election cycle, he interviewed every major Republican candidate for the presidency on national TV. If he asked me to do something immoral or illegal I would refuse, but we live in a different context today. I could go to HR or to the police or take to the airwaves if he committed a crime. Still, coming forward could ultimately cost me my job. That's the risk anyone takes when they attempt to hold accountable those in power. Bathsheba had none of these options. If she resisted, then it could have disastrous implications for herself or more likely for her husband. As it turns out, even her compliance cost Uriah his life.

This is why the Torah is so insistent that the king write a copy of the Torah for himself and keep it by his side, reading it daily and living by it. Those in power are especially susceptible to the fiction that they are above the law. Not so in Israel. This story serves as a commentary on the limits of monarchical power.

- David cannot have Bathsheba without consequences.
- David cannot control female fertility.
- He cannot force Uriah to act against his conscience (the narrator seems to recognize this by saying that David "said" for Uriah to go home, rather than "sending" him home).
- He cannot guarantee the outcome of a battle or who precisely is killed.
- He cannot make God look with favor on his actions.
- David cannot pass judgment on another without passing judgment on himself.
- He cannot persuade God to spare the life of their son.

David is not the autocrat he imagines himself to be.

*Where does this leave us?*

The text says neither that Bathsheba was naked, nor that she was on the rooftop, nor that she was flaunting her body or flirting with David, nor even that she knew he was standing where he could see her, or that she came to him eagerly. If the point of the story was to chastise her for immodesty or forward behavior, the narrator had plenty of opportunity to do that, and so did the prophet Nathan. Instead, the text affirms that Bathsheba was Torah-observant, in stark contrast to a whole string of Torah violations on the part of David: he covets his neighbor's wife, violates his neighbor's marriage, murders his neighbor, and takes his neighbor's wife (and property?) for himself.

Nathan's parable clearly characterizes Bathsheba as an innocent lamb, a pawn in the designs of the powerful rich man. His concluding rebuke defines the "evil in his eyes" as the

following: “Uriah the Hittite you have struck with the sword in order to take his wife for yourself as a wife.” The purpose of David’s machinations is clearly revealed here. Uriah died for the sole reason that David wanted Bathsheba as his own. It is not about covering David’s guilt or hiding his shame. It is about satisfying his lust for power. By taking Uriah’s wife, David has “conquered” his own mighty warrior. Perhaps by staying home from the front, David developed a need to assert his dominance over against those fighting his battles. Like Saul, he has misdiagnosed the enemy, taking out his best fighter instead of the Ammonites who have shamed him.

### **Does it matter how we fill the gaps?**

I was first intrigued by public engagement with this story in the wake of the #metoo and #churchtoo movements, when the David and Bathsheba story was trending every 3-4 months. Increasing scrutiny of power dynamics in sexual encounters in recent years sent all of us back to the biblical text to examine biblical stories with these lenses. Did Bathsheba want to be with David? Why didn’t she protest? Did she have a choice in the matter? And the classic question that is asked again and again, “What was she wearing?”

What I noticed is that those who tended to downplay the extent of sexual abuse in the church also tended to say that Bathsheba was asking for it. Those most likely to describe a sexual encounter between a youth pastor and a minor as an “affair” were also likely to suggest that Bathsheba was complicit and that their relationship was consensual, while those who referred to clergy misconduct as power rape were likely to use the same term to describe David’s behavior.

Why do interpreters engage in such damaging speculation about Bathsheba’s motives and at the same time tend to minimize David’s sin? We *like* David. We’ve been rooting for him against Saul, so we experience psychological distress when he proves untrustworthy. The destabilization of David’s integrity makes us question our own judgment. To restabilize, we invent excuses for him.

Here’s one example, again, from Bishop Robert Barron:

“According to the standard Jewish sensibility, a woman was particularly receptive to conception in the week or so just following menstruation. Therefore one might be justified in thinking that the rooftop bath was far from innocent but rather a non-too subtle advertisement to the king that Bathsheba was interested in becoming pregnant. That Bathsheba is far from a merely passive object of manipulation is emphatically confirmed at the beginning of 1 Kings, where we learn that she cleverly and successfully lobbies the aged David to allow her son Solomon to succeed to the throne.”

Step 1, attribute motives to Bathsheba, imagining that she wants David to impregnate her. Step 2, confirm these motives with reference to her strength of persuasion during an incident more than 20 years later. To be frank, I find it alarming that a Catholic Bishop who is a media sensation has such cavalier ways of characterizing Bathsheba, particularly in an age where victim-blaming has led to so much unnecessary hurt.

Step 3, minimize any stain on David’s character. Here’s what Bishop Barron (Brazos, 2017) says of David, “He is not presented as a sexual pervert or a self-involved, power-hungry tyrant; quite the contrary, he is a remarkably good man, one of the best that Israel ever produced,

a new Adam. And yet, like the old Adam, he sinned.” (96) He calls this incident “David’s adultery with Bathsheba,” suggesting that these “crimes of passion” are “relatively forgivable” (104). Indeed, God *does* forgive David, but not until he has made clear that David’s behavior was despicable.

So here we have the formula for a modern-day disaster: the tendency to view Bathsheba with suspicion as a seductress while minimizing David’s sin. Let’s just say I would *not* want to be a victim of a sexual crime in Barron’s diocese. His failure to reckon with the depths of David’s sin and his unwillingness to see David’s abuse of power for what it is sets off alarm bells for me, especially because he holds so much religious and political power himself. Someone with 3.1 million Facebook followers, 1.42 million YouTube subscribers, and over 400k Instagram followers and who is called upon regularly by major news networks to comment on current events<sup>27</sup> is in a very dangerous position if he cannot recognize abuse of power when it is right in front of his nose. Being a poor exegete does not make him guilty of abuse, but it could very well make him complicit in it, given his position of spiritual influence over countless priests. By shaping the way others read this story, he could unwittingly shape the ways they respond to real-life situations of abuse.

As we have seen, the tendency for preachers to blame Bathsheba at least in part for David’s sin is not a modern problem. It has persisted through the ages. Perhaps the spiciest defense of Bathsheba is from Arcangela Tarabotti, a 17<sup>th</sup> century female interpreter. Tarabotti insists that “Uriah’s wife was at home, minding her own affairs bathing—whether for enjoyment or necessity, it matters little—but David eyed her . . . What blame can one possibly attribute to that innocent woman, overwhelmed by the splendor of the king’s majesty?” (RCS 194). Tarabotti points to God’s rebuke of David—and not Bathsheba—as an invective against the preachers of her day: “Your lying insulting tongues never cease preaching that the source and origin of all fornication and adultery is woman. . . . Many of you are enemies of our sex” (RCS 203).

To preach this story well requires great caution. Not only is the meaning of the passage at stake, but its implications for innumerable other stories of sexual sin represented in our congregations. One-half of all adult women and one-third of adult men have experienced sexual violence in some form.<sup>28</sup> One in six women and one in 33 men are victims of attempted rape.<sup>29</sup> Two-thirds of these incidents are unreported.<sup>30</sup> Incidents of sexual harassment are much higher, affecting 81% of women and 43% of men at some point in their lifetime.<sup>31</sup> Predatory sexual

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<sup>27</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Barron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Barron)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.charliehealth.com/post/sexual-assault-statistics#:~:text=Hundreds%20of%20thousands%20of%20people,sexually%20assaulted%2C%20RAINN%20data%20shows.>

<sup>29</sup> <https://rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.charliehealth.com/post/sexual-assault-statistics#:~:text=Hundreds%20of%20thousands%20of%20people,sexually%20assaulted%2C%20RAINN%20data%20shows.>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

behavior invades homes and families at a disturbing rate. Like Bathsheba, 55% of sexual assault victims in the US are at or near home when the sexual assault occurs.<sup>32</sup>

The way we characterize David and Bathsheba is being heard with particular intensity by many in our communities. As we preach, members of our congregation are deciding whether we are safe—safe to disclose incidents of sexual abuse—or whether we are likely to heap further abuse upon victims by suggesting that they were complicit in some way. It is essential that we slow down and speak clearly, condemning any and all abuses of power and supporting victims as they seek restoration and healing.

*What shall we call this?*

One way we can exercise caution is by considering the labels we use for this incident. While sex with a married woman is classified as “adultery” in biblical parlance, the word “adultery” today presumes the consent of both parties. Commenting on the Ten Commandments, Victor Hamilton goes so far as to define adultery in the Bible as “a consensual sexual relationship between a man, either married or unmarried, and a married or engaged woman other than his spouse.”<sup>33</sup> The word “affair” is even more suggestive of the intentional and passionate participation of both parties. So as tempting as it may be to refer to the incident, perhaps even tongue-in-cheek as an “affair,” I strongly urge against it. In my survey of commentaries, I noticed that many people referred to this incident as an instance of “adultery” or an “affair” or even a “tryst,” even while insisting that David was solely responsible. This muddies the question of blame that the Bible places squarely in David’s lap.

Some recoil from using the word “rape” to describe what David did because the text does not report the use of force or Bathsheba’s resistance and does not employ the technical term for rape. One reason may be that the sexual encounter is not the focus of the passage. The narrator briefly summarizes the encounter and moves on to the central concern—David’s power play with Uriah. However, here, too we need to be careful. Rape, as defined in English, does not require the use of force. The dictionary.com definition includes “any sexual activity, with or without penetration, that takes place without the consent of one of the people involved.”<sup>34</sup> Are we avoiding the word rape because we like David too much? Why are we unwilling to call this what it is?

David, the man who already has seven wives and plenty of leisure time and who has all the military power he could possibly want at his disposal, is in his palace coldly calculating the demise of one of his elite warriors so that he can take that man’s wife into his own bed with impunity. John Calvin did not shy away from calling David a “monster,” and “the most morally lax and promiscuous person in the world,” since as king it was his job to protect others’ property, their marriages, and their lives.”<sup>35</sup> And Peter Leithart, who can hardly be called a woke liberal,

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<sup>32</sup> <https://rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem>

<sup>33</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 345.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/rape>

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (1:476).

noted that Bathsheba was probably a generation younger than David (217). He muses, “Once we understand Bathsheba’s relationship with David, his adultery appears even more disgusting, the work of a dirty old man and leering voyeur, of a sexual predator whose lust was almost incestuous” (218).<sup>36</sup>

Robert Chisholm notes that David’s rise to power has been punctuated with reports of the growth of his harem (2 Sam. 3:2-5; 5:13-16). This story, then, fits with the pattern: to take Bathsheba does not represent a singular failure of an otherwise godly man, but rather “the culmination of a disturbing trend.”<sup>37</sup> That trend, according to David Firth, was to conquer his enemies by taking their wives as trophies of his own. In 2 Samuel 11, David adds another notch to his belt by shrewdly disposing of one of his loyal and faithful servants and depositing the man’s wife in his harem.

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**Meir Sternberg (1985)** plays with the ambiguities in the text, noting that two lines of reasoning are possible to fill the gaps in the narrative, one which suggests that Uriah knows of David’s dalliance with Uriah’s wife and another which assumes he doesn’t know. The astute reader is drawn in to adjudicate the possibilities. Most pertinent to our question here is the assessment of David’s feelings toward Bathsheba. David’s wiles with Uriah suggest that he is not eager to take Bathsheba as his wife, rather he “concentrates his energies on a switch of paternity . . . [which] does not exactly suggest a schemer on fire with love. On the contrary, this is the behavior of a man who regrets his involvement and is now trying to evade the consequences” (210). In other words, David’s behavior suggests that this is not a case of romance, but rather of conquest. As such it is like the Amnon story in which he first desires Tamar and then despises her after he is through with her (2 Samuel 13:14-17).

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Leithart, *A Son to Me* (Moscow, ID, Canon Press 2003)

<sup>37</sup> *1&2 Samuel* (Teach the Text, Baker, 2013) (233-34).