

Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology

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Introduction

The historical narrative of David's adultery involving Bathsheba (2 Sam 11-12) has often been interpreted as implicating Bathsheba as co-conspirator or at least as partly to blame. For example, Randall Bailey argues at some length that Bathsheba is "a willing and equal partner to the events that transpire"¹; H. W. Hertzberg suggests a possible element of "feminine flirtation"²; and Lillian Klein speaks of "Bathsheba's complicity in the sexual adventure."³ Similarly, according to Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "the text seems to imply that Bathsheba asked to be 'sent for' and 'taken.'"⁴ Do these interpretations represent the intent of the narrator? How can one decide?

¹ Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 86.

² H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1964), 309.

³ Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 56. Cf. idem, "Bathsheba Revealed," in *Samuel and Kings: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner, Feminist Companion to the Bible 2/7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 2000), 47–64.

⁴ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Slingshots, Ships, and Personal Psychosis: Murder, Sexual Intrigue, and Power in the Lives of David and Othello," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, Semeia Studies 44 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 59. Cf. the commentary of Keil and Delitzsch: "In the expression 'he took her, and she came to him,' there is no intimation whatever that David brought Bathsheba into his palace through craft or violence, but rather that she came at his request and without any hesitation, and offered no resistance to his desires. Consequently Bathsheba is not to be regarded as free from blame. The very act of bathing in the uncovered court of a

The narrative in 2 Sam 11-12 comprises one of the prime biblical examples of a sophisticated and intricately-written literary masterpiece, calling for careful attention and sensitivity to the inspired narrator's artistic techniques in order for the interpreter to grasp the theological truths highlighted in the narrative. Here I summarize some eighteen lines of evidence that have convinced me—contrary to the common interpretation implicating Bathsheba—that Bathsheba was a victim of “power rape” on the part of David and that the narrator indicts David, not Bathsheba.⁵

Narrative Analysis of 2 Samuel 11-12

1. Literary Structure. Yehuda Radday's literary analysis of 1–2 Samuel reveals a chiasm encompassing each book.⁶ David's sin involving Bathsheba (recorded in 2 Sam 11-12) is placed at the chiasmic center of 2 Samuel, just as Saul's failure to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) forms the chiasmic apex of 1 Samuel. The first half of each book depicts the successful rise to power of Saul and David, respectively; the central chapters of the respective chiasm delineate each king's pivotal moral failure, his “great sin”; and the last half of each book portrays the decline of the respective king as a result of his sin. Thus, 2 Sam 11-12 serves as the fulcrum event in the life of David, tipping him toward his descent from integrity and power. The emphasis within the overall literary structure of 2 Samuel points to David's moral fall as the critical turning point in his life and implicitly lays the blame for this moral fall squarely at his feet.

2. Historical Context (vv. 1–2). Already in the introduction to this narrative, the ironic contrast is set forth, with a long sentence about the war—“Now it came to pass in the spring of the year, at the time when

house in the heart of the city, into which it was possible for any one to look down from the roofs of the houses on higher ground, does not say much for her feminine modesty, even if it was not done with an ulterior purpose, as some commentators suppose” (C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, trans. James Martin, 1872 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 383).

⁵ See especially the following careful narrative analyses which also support this conclusion: Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 144–155; and Moshe Garsiel, “The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 244–262. I am indebted to the insights of Dennis and Garsiel in many of the points that follow.

⁶ Yehuda T. Radday, “Chiasm in Samuel,” *LB* 9–10/3 (1973): 23; idem, “Chiasmus in Biblical Hebrew Narrative,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 78–80.

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kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the people of Ammon and besieged Rabbah”—juxtaposed with a short three-Hebrew-word statement about David: “But David remained in Jerusalem.” The Hebrew word order of this last clause emphasizes the subject “David” by placing it first in the clause, instead of the usual order of verb followed by subject, which is roughly equivalent in English to highlighting David’s name with italics. At the time of year when *kings* normally go forth to war, David’s general and his army, yes “all Israel” are risking their lives on the battlefield, but *King David himself* stays home in Jerusalem. The contemporary readers are aware that in the world of the books of Samuel, people expected their king to “go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam 8:19), and they remember that David gained his initial prestige for strong and daring leadership when he went out to battle in contrast to the stay-at-home King Saul (1 Sam 18:19; cf. 2 Sam 5:2). As Meir Sternberg remarks, “It therefore leaps to the eye that this is the first war in which David fails to lead the army in person.”⁷ The irony is intensified in v. 2 when, in contrast to the nation fighting at Rabbah, the narrator describes David in relative isolation, “leading a life of idleness in Jerusalem, taking his leisurely siesta, getting up in the evening, and strolling about on his roof.”⁸

3. Topographic and Architectural Data Illumined by Archaeology (vv. 2,8–10,13). The archaeological excavations of the city of David have unearthed the Millo (near-vertical retaining wall) probably supporting the royal palace in David’s time,⁹ and some remains of David’s royal palace itself may also have been uncovered.¹⁰ The elevated placement of the royal palace makes clear that David would have had a commanding view over the dwellings in the Kidron Valley directly below. (One can still stand atop the “stepped-stone structure” [probably the “Millo” of 2 Sam 5:9] of the city of David and have a clear view into the courtyards of the houses in the modern village of Silwan below—I did, while contemplating this narrative!) The text indicates that Bathsheba’s house was among those dwellings in the valley below the palace (vv. 8–13 repeat five times the necessity of Uriah to “go down” [*yārad*] to his

⁷ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 194.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁹ See 2 Sam 5:6–9. Cf. David Tarler and Jane M. Cahill, “David, City of,” *ABD* 2:55–56; G. J. Waightman, *The Walls of Jerusalem: From the Canaanites to the Mamluks*, Mediterranean Archaeological Supplement 4 (Sydney: Meditarch, 1993), 27–37.

¹⁰ See Eilat Mazar, “Did I Find King David’s Palace?” *BAR* 32/1 (January/February 2006), 16–27, 70.

house from the palace). The architectural reconstructions of the typical Israelite four-room house reveal an open courtyard where household residents probably bathed.¹¹ All these data combine to make the point that from his rooftop David could have seen a woman bathing without her being deliberately provocative.

4. The Time of Day (v. 2) and Purpose of Bathing (vv. 2,4). It is not merely incidental that the narrator mentions the time of day when David sees Bathsheba bathing. It is early evening (the Hebrew narrator punctuates this with deliberateness: *lě'ēt hā'ereb*, literally “to the time of the evening”). Verse 4 makes clear the purpose of Bathsheba’s bathing: she is engaging in a ritual washing, purifying herself from the ritual impurity incurred during her monthly period, as required in Lev 15:19,28.¹²

¹¹ For a description of the four-room house, see Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 486; Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 28–35. Regarding the likelihood of Bathsheba’s full-body bath in the courtyard, see, e.g., Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 78: “Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, was taking a full-body bath, possibly in her courtyard, when David, who was on the roof of his house, saw her and liked her (2 Sam 11:2).”

¹² The clause “she [had been] purifying herself [*hitpa'el* ptc. of *qādaš*] from her ritual impurity” is best taken as a parenthetical flashback to v. 2, explaining the purpose of Bathsheba’s bathing as constituting a ritual cleansing from her menstrual period. The narrator clearly marks this as a parenthetical statement by interrupting a whole string of verbal forms indicating narrative flow—*vav* consecutives plus the imperfect—with this abrupt and singular appearance of the participle indicating a state. The parenthetical use of the participle here in v. 4 links grammatically and conceptually with the only other participle found in the sexual encounter scene (vv. 2-5), i.e., the “bathing” of Bathsheba in v. 2, the latter (“she [had been] purifying herself”) clarifying the reason for the former (“bathing”). Versions such as NJPS capture the intent of the Hebrew text of this verse: “David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her—she had just purified herself after her period—and she went back home.” (See also the NIV, NLT, NJB, and ESV for similar translations.) Some modern versions (e.g., NASB) have taken v. 4 to indicate that after Bathsheba had sex with David she engaged in a ritual post-coital purification and then returned to her house (so also, e.g., Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 57, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* [New York: Schocken, 2002], 147). Such an interpretation fails to recognize the narrative clue of the grammatical interruption of verbal narration by a participle denoting state and seems to be based in part on the assumption that since Lev 15:19,28 do not explicitly mention a ritual ablution after a women’s menstrual period is complete, this cannot be what is referred to by the narrative (but “is anachronistically based on later rabbinic law” [ibid.]). However, Jacob Milgrom gives weighty evidence showing that “all statements regarding the duration of impurity [in Leviticus] automatically imply that it is terminated by ablutions” (*Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 [New York: Double-

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According to the Levitical legislation, a woman was “in her impurity seven days” (v. 19), and the counting of the days ended in the evening (at sunset, the biblical beginning of the next day). Hence, the evening, right after sunset, would be the expected time for a woman completing her menstrual period to engage in the ritual washing. There is no hint of a deliberate ploy on the part of Bathsheba recorded in this part of the narrative. Rather, while Bathsheba was seeking to faithfully discharge the requirements of Torah regarding prescribed ceremonial cleansing from ritual uncleanness, David was lustfully watching her.

5. David’s Walking Around on the Palace Rooftop (v. 2). The fact that David is “walking around” (*hitpa’el* of *hālak*, v. 2) and happens to see Bathsheba bathing also implies chance circumstances, not a plot. That David was not stalking Bathsheba specifically is indicated in v. 3, in that he did not know the identity of Bathsheba at the time he saw her bathing and needed to inquire concerning her.

At the same time, David’s strolling about on the palace rooftop at this very time of day may reveal the first deliberate steps in his moral fall. It is not unreasonable to assume that the generally-accepted code of decency in David’s day included the understanding that it was inappropriate to look out from one’s rooftop or upper-story down into the courtyard of a neighbor’s property at this time of day, out of respect for privacy, since this was the normal time for baths to be taken. Still today this is part of an unwritten but strictly-enforced code of ethics prevalent in Middle Eastern culture (that I experienced personally while living in Jerusalem).¹³ For David to stroll on his rooftop at this time of day was

day, 1991], 934). Those who see no connection between Bathsheba’s bathing and her purification after her menstrual period fail to recognize that this otherwise inconsequential detail is actually reserved for this location to establish beyond question that Bathsheba’s pregnancy mentioned in the next verse is due to the sexual impregnation by David that has just occurred. Having just been purified from her monthly period before this sex act, there is no possibility that Bathsheba was pregnant from Uriah her husband. Sternberg notices how “what was previously taken as an objective and impartial recording of external facts now turns into covert indictment” of David, and he also points out an even greater irony: “the very detail that might at first have been interpreted as the sole meritorious feature of David’s act (‘and he did not transgress the laws of menstrual purity’) twists around to condemn him.” (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 198.)

¹³ For a line of thought similar to mine, see Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 72: “Perhaps it was assumed by etiquette of the time that those on their rooftops looked out but not down, so as to preserve the privacy of others.”

probably already to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, inviting temptation to impure thoughts and actions.

That David's sin started with lustful looking on his rooftop is made clear later in the narrative when Yahweh decrees judgment upon David for his sin. Nathan predicts the divine punishment of *lex talionis* ("measure for measure" retributive justice): "*Before your very eyes I will take away your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight*" (2 Sam 12:11b, NIV). According to 2 Sam 16:21-22, David's son Absalom rapes his father's wives/concubines on the roof of the king's house. Moshe Garsiel insightfully points out the narrative parallel of David's rooftop lust and his son's rape of David's wives on the same rooftop:

To look at a woman who is bathing and covet her constitutes a deviation from the modesty usual between the sexes (Gen 24:64; Job 31:1), so the narrator invokes the principle of "measure for measure" upon the location where the sin commences. From his roof David sees the woman with whom he later commits adultery, and on that same roof Absalom takes his father's concubines.¹⁴

The narrator's description of David's walking about on the rooftop of his palace, by sight invading the privacy of his subjects below, also has the effect of putting him "in the position of a despot who is able to survey and choose as he pleases."¹⁵

6. The Identity of the Bather (v. 3). When David inquires as to the identity of the one he has lusted after, he is told by someone, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (v. 3). The information concerning Bathsheba's identity takes on enormous significance when one realizes that *both* Bathsheba's father (Eliam) and husband (Uriah) are listed among the select group of soldiers called David's "Thirty Mighty Men" (2 Sam 23:13,34,39). These men were David's close comrades, "trench-buddies" who had fought together before David was king! Furthermore, Eliam was the son of Ahithophel, David's personal counselor (2 Sam 15:12; 1 Chr 27:33). The question, "Is this not Bathsheba, Eliam's daughter, Uriah's wife?" should have pricked David's conscience and restrained his lust. Recognizing such

¹⁴ Garsiel, "The Story of David and Bathsheba," 253.

¹⁵ J. P. Fokkelman, *King David (II Sam 9–20 & I Kings 1–2)*, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, vol. 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 51.

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intimate ties between David and Bathsheba's husband and father and grandfather, makes the sexual sin of David against Bathsheba all the more audacious and appalling. He took his close friends' wife/daughter/granddaughter!

7. Accelerated Narrative Tempo (v. 4). The fast narrative flow of 2 Sam 11:4 depicts David's impulsive succumbing to lust as he "sent messengers, and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her." The string of verbs in this narrative sequence ("saw . . . sent . . . inquired . . . sent . . . took her . . . lay with her") indicates that it is David's initiative throughout, not Bathsheba's. These verbs, as Trevor Dennis puts it,

speak his power, and tell, surely, of his abuse of that and of Bathsheba herself. There is a terrible abruptness and stark quality to his actions. There is no time for speech or conversation, no time for care, and certainly none for love, no time for even courtly etiquette. . . . Bathsheba's verbs in v. 4, by way of contrast, merely describe the setting for those actions of David, and their immediate prelude and aftermath.¹⁶

In particular, her action of coming to David (v. 4, "she came to him") is in obedient response to the explicit command of her sovereign lord, the king. "Summoned by the king, she must obey."¹⁷ This interpretation is later confirmed by the use of the same expression with reference to her husband Uriah, who, after being summoned by David, obediently "came to him" (2 Sam 11:7). That the authority of David's command was not to be trifled with is also confirmed in the later experience of Uriah: "Uriah's noncompliance with David's suggestions, commands, and manipulations cost him his life."¹⁸ Bathsheba is portrayed as "a powerless woman who was victimized by the conglomeration of David's power, gender, and violence."¹⁹

8. Verbs of Initiative Indicating David's Power Rape (v. 4). Two verbs found at the heart of this action-packed scene have David as their

¹⁶ Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 148.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁸ Hyun Chul Paul Kim and M. Fulgence Nyengele, "Murder S/He Wrote? A Culture and Psychological Reading of 2 Samuel 11–12," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, Semeia Studies 44 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115. So also Kenneth A. Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 234 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1996), 97: "Bathsheba's action is no independent initiative (unlike David's), but the response to a royal command."

subject: David “takes her” and he “lies with her.” The word *lāqah* [“take”] in this context (of sending royal messengers) should probably be understood in the sense of “fetch” (NJB) or “summon”²⁰ and clearly implies psychological power pressure on the part of David and not voluntary collusion on the part of Bathsheba. According to the text, David sends “messengers” (plural), but the verb *lāqah* [“take”] has a singular masculine subject (“he took her”). Although many modern versions are ambiguous at this point, giving the impression that it was the messengers who “took” Bathsheba to the palace, the Hebrew unambiguously indicates that “he,” i.e., David himself (by means of the messengers, to be sure,) “took” Bathsheba.²¹ By using the term *lāqah* [“took”], the narrator clearly implies that “the primary emphasis is on the responsibility of the subject for that act.”²² David’s “taking” Bathsheba makes him responsible for her coming to him. The whole narrative flow here suggests Bathsheba’s vulnerability once she is inside the palace, yes, even before. As Dennis asks, “Who is there who might protect her from the designs of the king? We are made to feel there is no one.”²³ Irmtraud Fischer elaborates: “If the woman [Bathsheba] were to cry for help, no one would dare force his or her way into the royal chambers to rescue the woman from her rapist!”²⁴

The expression “lay with” (*šākab ‘im*) used for the sexual intercourse between David and Bathsheba does not stress the use of overpowering physical brutality on the part of David, as in the case of the terminology used for the rape of Dinah (Gen 34) and Tamar (2 Sam 13).²⁵ However,

²⁰ See P. J. J. S. Els, “לָקַח,” NIDOTTE 2:814, meaning 1 (m), for examples of this common semantic nuance when *lāqah* is used of humans.

²¹ While it true that sometimes in Hebrew grammar the use of a Hebrew predicate in the singular does not always call for a singular subject (GKC Par. 145), in this context, the string of masculine singular verbs taking David as the subject are clearly employed by the narrator to point the finger of accusation against the king. As Dennis puts it, “David is the subject of the two verbs at the center of it all, the verbs that matter more than any of the others. He ‘takes her’; he ‘lies with her’. He takes her. He lies with her. That is how the storyteller puts it. In doing so he tells us all we need to know” (*Sarah Laughed*, 145; emphasis his).

²² Douglas W. Stolt, “לָקַח *lāqah*,” *TDOT* 8:17.

²³ Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 5.

²⁴ Irmtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel’s Beginnings*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2005), 93.

²⁵ The narrators in Gen 34:2 and 2 Sam 13:14 use the verb plus the direct object (*ōtāh*) “he lay her” rather than the usual indirect object (prepositional phrase *‘immāh*)

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as evidenced in the Pentateuchal legal material (Deut 22:25–27), the term “lay with” employed here can indeed imply rape if the context indicates such. Given the context of (at least psychological) coercion in this passage, the best modern expression to describe David’s action is “power rape,” in which a person in a position of authority abuses that “power” to victimize a subservient and vulnerable person sexually, whether or not the victim appears to give “consent.” David, the king, appointed by God to defend the helpless and vulnerable, becomes a victimizer of the vulnerable. Just as intercourse between an adult and a minor, even a “consenting” minor, is today termed “statutory rape,” so the intercourse between David and his subject Bathsheba (even if Bathsheba, under the psychological pressure of one in power over her, acquiesced to the intercourse) is understood in biblical law, and so presented in this narrative, to be a case of rape—what today we call “power rape,” and the victimizer, not the victim, is held accountable.²⁶

9. Bathsheba’s Response to the Power Rape (v. 4). The narrator stresses that after the sexual intercourse Bathsheba on her own initiative returned to her house and did not try to stay in the palace (v. 4b); she desired to go back to her status as Uriah’s wife. Her response to David after she knows she is pregnant is a mirror image of what David had done to her: as he sent messengers to fetch her, so now she sends a message to

“he lay with her” to indicate the brutality of the rape. Here in 2 Sam 11:4 we find the usual indirect object with the prepositional phrase *‘immāh*.

²⁶ For helpful discussion of sexual abuse of power in the case of David with Bathsheba, and modern counterparts, see Larry W. Spielman, “David’s Abuse of Power,” *WW* 19 (1999): 251–259. Cf. Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Men in Power—Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers, and Others—Betray Women’s Trust* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989), 21 (brackets 25): “any sexual behavior by a man in power within what I define as the forbidden zone [= ‘a condition of relationship in which sexual behavior is prohibited because a man holds in trust the . . . woman’] is inherently exploitive of a woman’s trust. Because he is keeper of that trust, it is the man’s responsibility, no matter what level of provocation or apparent consent by the woman” (italics his). See also Deut 22:25–26, for a situation parallel to that of David with Bathsheba: “But if a man finds a betrothed young woman in the countryside, and the man forces her and lies with her [verb *šākab* plus prep. phrase indirect ob. *‘immāh*, just as in 2 Sam 11:4], then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; there is in the young woman no sin worthy of death. . . . there was no one to save her.” Deuteronomy 22:25–27 speaks of no one to save the woman who (presumably) cried out in the countryside; the narrative of David and Bathsheba presents a similar situation in which “all Israel” is gone off to war, and Bathsheba, alone without her husband, finds herself coerced by the psychological power of the king, with “no one to save her.”

him that she is pregnant. Dennis shows how by this means the narrator gives to Bathsheba some dignity of her own:

She is doing what David did. She is sending him a message. She is answering his show of power with hers. He asserted his power over her by raping her. She asserts her power over him by conveying to him the words: 'I am pregnant.' . . . To David they [these two words in Hebrew] are devastating. He will never be the same again. On them the plot of his whole story, from 1 Samuel 16 to 1 Kings 2, turns. They are not the triumphant cry of a woman who knows she bears the probable heir to the throne. They are the plain speaking of a woman who has been raped and discarded and who wishes most courageously to make clear to her rapist the consequences of his act.²⁷

Bathsheba's response to David, "I am pregnant," far from implicating her as co-conspirator, reveal her as the victim who seeks to hold her rapist responsible for his rape.

10. David's Continued Use of Royal Power to Summon Uriah (v. 6). Verse 6 contains only one verb, "send" (*šālah*), and this verb is utilized three times in the verse to describe David's use of kingly power to summon Uriah: "So David sent (*šālah*) to Joab. . . . Send (*šālah*) me Uriah the Hittite. . . . And Joab sent (*šālah*) Uriah to David." The parallel between David's action toward Bathsheba and his actions toward her husband in this same paragraph of the narrative cannot be overlooked. Just as Uriah's wife was sent for, so he is sent for. Just as Uriah is helpless and must do what the king orders, so Bathsheba was constrained by the same power pressure of the king's orders. David's power rape of Bathsheba is paired with his "power murder" of Uriah.

11. Bathsheba's Response to Word of Uriah's Death (vv. 26–27). The strong emotive language used to describe Bathsheba's grieving for Uriah when she heard he was killed assures us that she was not co-conspirator with David: she doesn't merely engage in customary "mourning" (*'ēbal*, v. 27) but "wails/laments with loud cries" (*sāpad*, v. 26). The narrator here "uses a strong verb to express her wailing and lamentation, much more heavily freighted with emotion than the one he uses in the next verse of the rites of mourning."²⁸

²⁷ Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 149.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151–152. Cf. BDB, 704.

12. References to Bathsheba and Uriah at the Time of Uriah's Death (v. 26). The fact that the narrator still here calls her “the wife of Uriah” implies her continued fidelity to her husband, as does the reference to Uriah as “her lord/husband.” By using the term *ba'al* [“lord”] to denote her husband, the narrator intimates that “if Uriah is her ‘lord,’ then David is not.”²⁹ Furthermore, it is important to notice that the narrator carefully avoids using the name of Bathsheba throughout the entire episode of David's sinning, making her character more impersonal, and thus perhaps further conveying the narrator's intention of suggesting that Bathsheba wasn't personally responsible.

13. Imagery of David's Ruthlessness Regarding Bathsheba (v. 27). After her mourning rites were passed, according to v. 27 David again sent for Bathsheba and “harvested” her: the Hebrew word *'āsap* (usually used for harvesting a crop or mustering an army)³⁰ further implies King David's capacity for cold and calculating ruthlessness, which was exercised in his power rape of Bathsheba and subsequent summoning (“harvesting”) of her to the palace.

14. The Narrator's Explicit Indictment of David, not Bathsheba (v. 27). In this same verse is a crucial statement of culpability: “The thing that David had done [note—not what David and Bathsheba had done] displeased the Lord.” As Dennis pointedly remarks, “David is here condemned by God, but Bathsheba is not. The most natural way to interpret that is to suppose that Bathsheba has indeed been the innocent party all along, and David's victim, not his co-conspirator.”³¹ Those who set forth arguments such as, “She could/should have said no!” are simply not hearing the overriding theological message of the narrative!

15. Nathan's Parable and Interpretation Indicting David and not Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1–6). The parable told by the prophet Nathan to David in the next chapter confirms the conclusion that it is David who is indicted for his victimization of both Bathsheba and Uriah. Nathan equates the “little ewe lamb” with Bathsheba,³² who had (like the lamb) “lain in the bosom.” Dennis rightly draws the implication: “Now there

²⁹ Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 152.

³⁰ BDB, 62; HALOT, 74.

³¹ Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 152–153.

³² Dennis (*ibid.*, 154) points to a number of narrative details that confirm this equation. For example, the phrase “lie in his bosom,” referring to the lamb, also has sexual connotations of Bathsheba lying in her husband Uriah's bosom (cf. 2 Sam 12:8; 1 Kgs 1:2; Mic 7:5). Again, the mention of the lamb being like the *bat* [“daughter”] is probably a play on words with the beginning of the name Bathsheba.

can be no doubt left. The lamb in Nathan's parable is an innocent victim. Nothing could be clearer. And that means Bathsheba in ch. 11 was also an innocent victim. Unless, of course, both Nathan and God have seriously misjudged the events!"³³ God and Nathan have not misjudged!

Furthermore, Nathan announces the death of the child conceived from David's intercourse with Bathsheba as divine judgment upon David's sin, not upon the sin of both David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:13–14). Nathan could easily have used the plural pronouns, "The Lord has put away your [plural] sin," implicating both David and Bathsheba, as plural pronouns appear in other biblical passages when the couple are indicted together (e.g., Deut 22:22,24), but consistently throughout this passage Nathan utilizes singular pronouns, referring only to David's sin.

16. The Honoring of Bathsheba as Progenitor of the Davidic Line (2 Sam 12:24–25). After David's repentance and forgiveness for his sin, David and Bathsheba had another son, Solomon, and the narrator makes the striking statement that "the Lord loved him" (v. 24). It is the son of Bathsheba, and not another of David's wives, who becomes the divinely-appointed successor to David and part of the ongoing Davidic royal line (1 Kgs 1). Whereas David's part in the sexual encounter incurs sharp rebuke by Yahweh, Bathsheba, by contrast, is blessed by bearing the next king of Israel.

17. Bathsheba the Faithful One in the Time of Revolt Against David (1 Kgs 1). Far from being presented as a sinister character throughout the narratives of Samuel-Kings, and therefore to be regarded in character as co-conspirator in this narrative, as some have surmised, Bathsheba is presented by the narrator of Samuel-Kings as consistently faithful to David and the concerns of the kingdom, even when close associates betrayed the king. During the attempt by Adonijah, Solomon's older brother, to usurp the kingship, Bathsheba constitutes one of the few individuals faithful to David in the royal court. Bathsheba, Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and a few others remained faithful when even General Joab and Abiathar the priest sided with Adonijah, and Bathsheba played a decisive role, under the encouragement of Nathan, in motivating David to appoint Solomon as his co-regent before it was too late (1 Kgs 1:11–31). In a later attempt by Adonijah to usurp Solomon's throne, Bathsheba reveals her trusting and forgiving spirit, even willing to ask a favor of her son Solomon on behalf of Adonijah, clearly unaware that

³³ Ibid., 155.

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this favor (that Adonijah be allowed to marry Abishag) was an attempt by Adonijah to take over Solomon's throne (1Kgs 2:13–22). The conclusion of this episode of the narrative makes apparent that King Solomon did not hold Bathsheba responsible, but rather his conniving half-brother who had taken advantage of Bathsheba's innocent willingness to do a favor even for one who had earlier sought to usurp the throne from her son (1 Kgs 2:23–25). In light of the invariably positive characterization of Bathsheba in other narratives of Samuel-Kings, any suggestion of her complicity in 2 Sam 11 would be inconsistent with the larger canonical context of this narrative.

18. Bathsheba as Progenitor of the Messiah (Matt 1:6). Christians may add another piece of evidence regarding the consistently positive characterization of Bathsheba in the biblical canon. Bathsheba is chosen by the evangelist Matthew as one of five women to be included in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah.³⁴ She is placed among the honored women in the line of the Messiah!

In light of the evidence presented above, I conclude that Bathsheba was not a sinister character, nor an accomplice in the events described in 2 Sam 11-12, but an innocent victim of power rape on the part of King David. By means of numerous narrative techniques in this literary masterpiece, the narrator communicates powerfully—perhaps more powerfully than the explicit pentateuchal legal prohibitions—the divine indictment against rape, and in particular “power rape” by a person in authority.

The Narrative of David and Bathsheba in the Adventist Tradition

Seventh-day Adventist commentators, like many other Christians in the history of interpretation, have not been immune from placing at least part of the blame upon Bathsheba in the narrative of 2 Sam 11-12. For example, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* states: “There is no indication that David's messengers took Bath-sheba by force. Bath-sheba was beautiful, and she was not beyond temptation. Possibly she

³⁴ Interestingly, all of these women were misunderstood, maligned, mistreated, or denigrated in some way: Tamar was wronged by Judah; Rahab was despised as a prostitute; Ruth the Moabitess was seen as a foreigner; Bathsheba has often been accused of seducing David; and Mary was suspected of marital unfaithfulness to Joseph. It is true that David also is included in this genealogy, necessarily so since the Messiah was “the son of David,” but the reference to Bathsheba was not essential to the flow of the genealogy, and thus her inclusion specifically affirms and honors her, along with the other four women so honored.

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was flattered by the overtures made to her by the king, and yielded herself to David without resistance.”³⁵

However, there is an exception to this line of Adventist interpretation implicating Bathsheba. Nineteenth-century Adventist interpreter Ellen White, standing over against the prevailing trend of mostly-male interpretations of the Bathsheba-David narrative in her generation, unequivocally points the finger of guilt solely at David, and not Bathsheba, as the one who committed great injustice and sinned against Bathsheba just as surely as he did against Uriah her husband. In her various references to this OT event, White consistently presents the grievous sin of David as *toward* Bathsheba, not *with* her. According to White, Bathsheba is wronged by David, and not one word of condemnation goes toward Bathsheba, who is presented as the victim of David’s great injustice against her. Furthermore, White describes Bathsheba in her later life as David’s wife and Solomon’s mother not as a sinister person, but as one of the faithful remnant in David’s kingdom. Here is a sample of White’s comments on this narrative and her characterization of Bathsheba:

David was made to feel bitterly the fruits of wrongdoing. His sons acted over the sins of which he had been guilty. Amnon committed a great crime. Absalom revenged it by slaying him. Thus was David's sin brought continually to his mind, and he was made to feel the full weight of the *injustice done to Uriah and Bathsheba*.³⁶

As time passed on, David's *sin toward Bathsheba* became known, and suspicion was excited that he had planned the death of Uriah.³⁷

David had committed a *grievous sin, toward both Uriah and Bathsheba*, and he keenly felt this. But infinitely greater was his sin against God.³⁸

³⁵ The *Seventh-day Adventist Commentary*, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington: Review and Herald, 1954), 2:647.

³⁶ Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 4a (reprint, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1945), 89; idem, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, 1870 (Washington: Review and Herald, 1969), 381 (italics supplied).

³⁷ Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 1890 (Washington: Review and Herald, 1958), 720 (italics supplied).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 722 (italics supplied).

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The defection of Ahithophel, the ablest and most wily of political leaders, was prompted by revenge for the family disgrace involved in the *wrong to Bathsheba*, who was his granddaughter.³⁹

The rebellion was ripe; the conspirators had assembled at a great feast just without the city to proclaim Adonijah king, when their plans were thwarted by the prompt action of a *few faithful persons*, chief among whom were Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and *Bathsheba the mother of Solomon*.⁴⁰

Ellen White, in harmony with the portrait that has emerged from our close reading of Scripture, clearly implicates David in his grievous sin against the innocent victim Bathsheba.

Conclusion

There are indeed biblical references to women who seduce men and receive divine condemnation (e.g., the “immoral woman” of Prov 1-9) and to women who commit sexually immoral acts together with men and together are indicted by God (e.g., Deut 22:22,24). But the account of Bathsheba is not such a reference. This narrative concerning Bathsheba and King David represents an indictment directed solely against the man and not the woman, against David and all men in positions of power (whether civil or ecclesiastical or academic) who take advantage of their “power” and victimize women sexually. Power rape receives the strongest possible theological condemnation in this narrative.

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³⁹ Ibid., 735 (italics supplied).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 749 (italics supplied).