Victim Blaming and the David and Bathsheba Narrative

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A few years ago, I found several colleagues across various schools in deep discussion over the question of Bathsheba's innocence or guilt in 2 Samuel 11. This was on the theologically astute site known as Facebook. As I read the comments, I offered my insights, given that one of my dissertation chapters is on David and Bathsheba. I have thought about this discussion, often asking: why is there a need to save David at the cost of blaming Bathsheba?

Many denominations have been affected in the past several years by scandals concerning sexual abuse and the cover-ups that sought to hide the abuse.[1] Victims of such abuse are further victimized by insinuations that they were willing participants or that they entrapped the men involved—men who are often in positions of leadership. Referred to as *victim blaming*, the men absolve themselves by deflecting personal accountability onto the victim. Related to this is *toxic masculinity* in churches where the submission of females to males is emphasized. This allows for situations with the potential for a variety of abuses: physical, psychological, and spiritual. This essay acknowledges that there is a spectrum of possible abuse in a church or other institution. However, the focus is the abuse of females by male authority figures.

The David and Bathsheba narrative of 2 Samuel 11 provides an example of such abuse. While the biblical text does not accuse Bathsheba of any wrongdoing, interpretations of the text sometimes situate Bathsheba as seducing David into adultery.

Literary Analysis of 2 Samuel 11

The narrator uses the introduction in v. 1 both to begin the story and to provide a transition from the previous chapter (2 Sam 10) by tying it to the theme of war.[2] Spring is when "kings go out to battle." David does not go to battle, but instead sends Joab out to lead on his behalf. The narrator establishes irony in the introduction by contrasting David with other kings.[3] While other kings go to war, David does not. While Joab and the soldiers leave home, David remains at home.[4]

The use of Hebrew verb "to send" serves an important role in the narrative. It emphasizes that David is the central focus of the narrative. It is used twelve times in the story (11:1–27), playing a role in each part except the conclusion (v. 27b).[5] In each scene, "send" brackets the action. In Scene One, David *sends* to enquire about the beautiful woman and then *sends* for her. The scene closes with the woman *sending* a message that she is pregnant.[6] Scene Two begins with David *sending* for Uriah and ends with David promising to *send* him back if he would stay another day. In Scene Three, David *sends* Uriah's death warrant to Joab through Uriah, unbeknownst to Uriah. Joab then *sends* a messenger to tell David that Uriah is dead. The final scene simply states that David *sends* for the woman and marries her. Significantly for this word motif, the next narrative (2 Sam 12) begins "And the LORD *sent* Nathan to David." The narrator is concerned with David's actions throughout the story. As the narrative proceeds, the emphasis is placed increasingly on David's actions, not Bathsheba's.

Verses 2–5 introduce Bathsheba to the narrative. David is walking on his rooftop after resting (v. 2). From this vantage point, David sees a beautiful woman bathing. After asking, he finds that the woman is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite. David sends for the woman, but nothing is said about his inner motivation for the summons. As Kyle McCarter puts it: "The most egregious behavior possible on the part of the king is attributed to David without a word of mitigation."[7]

Does Bathsheba purposely bathe outside to be seen by David? The narrator does not address this possibility, nor does the narrator seem to care about Bathsheba's motives. The emphasis is on David's initiative in the relationship that follows.[8] Bathsheba is a passive character, acted upon rather than acting.[9] The reader is not told whether she comes willingly or is forced. Outside of Bathsheba's mourning for her husband (v. 26) and her son (12:24), nothing is known of her emotions.[10] Bathsheba serves merely as the character David acts on through rape. When she is referred to, it is nearly always by the generic "woman" or "wife" (vv. 2, 3, 5, 11, 26, 27) and as such, related to a male (daughter of Eliam, v. 3; wife of Uriah, vv. 3, 26; David's wife, v. 27).[11] Only once is she called "Bathsheba" in the narrative (v. 3). Walter Brueggemann asserts: "She has no existence of her own but is identified by the men to whom she belongs."[12] In the culture of the ancient Near East, women had few rights and found their protection by being attached to a male. The narrator discloses just the one fact about Bathsheba: she is bathing to ritually cleanse herself after her monthly period (v. 4).[13] Significantly, the readers are told this fact after intercourse has occurred, so they are not surprised by the message that Bathsheba sends David: "I am pregnant" (v. 5).

The barebones style picks up again near the end of the story as it concerns Bathsheba: she mourns; David sends for her, brings her to the palace, and marries her; she bears him a son (vv. 26–27a). The conclusion ties together David's sexual wrongdoing and his murder of Uriah.[14]

What becomes clear is that 2 Samuel 11:1–27 is a study in David's character.[15] From the start, the narrator emphasizes that something is wrong with David: he has not gone out to war. The narrator then follows David through sexual sin, attempted cover-up, and murder. By the end of the story, the reader finds a David who is not concerned about the death of a loyal soldier; ironically, it is a death ordered by him. The narrator follows David throughout the story, inviting the reader to observe him as he becomes increasingly enveloped in his wrongdoing.

Within this story arc, Bathsheba is—surprisingly for some of us!—given the space occupied by a minor character. Through her, the narrator conveys David's initial sin. Little is known about her, outside of her beauty, lineage, and pregnancy. The other two times she is mentioned are in the succession from David to Solomon as

a go-between—between Nathan and David (1 Kgs 1:11–31) and between Adonijah and Solomon (1 Kgs 2:13–25). In each of the narratives in Samuel and Kings, Bathsheba is acted upon. She does not initiate action. So peripheral is she to the narrator's focus that she is not even mentioned in the Chronicler's accounts of David.

What further complicates our reading of Bathsheba is the use of narrative gaps throughout 2 Sam 11.[16] The reader's attention is caught by what is *not* communicated.[17] In vv. 2–5, the reader is not given information on questions such as: "Why does David stay home?" and "Why does Bathsheba come (immediately) when David sends for her?"

Interpretations of Bathsheba

In attempts to deal with this ambiguity in the narrative, Bathsheba's role is expanded in later interpretations. In her book, *Bathsheba Survives*, Sara M. Koenig tracks and examines the reception history of the David and Bathsheba story from rabbinic writings through modern times.[18] She says about Bathsheba:

> She has not only been characterized on the spectrum from helpless victim to unscrupulous seductress; but also, she has filled that spectrum. It might seem that the sparse profile of biblical Bathsheba stands in stark contrast to the varying interpretations of her through the centuries, but they are in fact, related. Bathsheba has invited a succession of gap-filling that has gone on through the centuries. Tracing the history of Bathsheba's reception through different eras illustrates how enigmatic and multidimensional the varying views of her have been over time.[19]

While early interpretations of Bathsheba tended to be more benevolent to her, later interpretations have not been. Koenig notes:

> The more negative interpretations of her as a seductress begin in the medieval period, and continue into the contemporary world. During the enlightenment the benign shifts to a both/and approach, where interpreters maintain that David is in the wrong, but also do not remove blame from Bathsheba for their sexual liaison.[20]

During the Enlightenment and in modern times, Bathsheba becomes a full-blown co-conspirator with David and is guilty of both adultery and murder. Perhaps this is best portrayed in the 1951 movie "David and Bathsheba," starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward. David and Bathsheba are portrayed as developing a love interest even before the 2 Samuel 11 narrative. Even in the more subtle references to Bathsheba's role in the story, Koenig comments how they "indicate that a woman is at fault for what a man has chosen to do, taking away his responsibility, and often blaming the victim."[21] These interpretations, again, seek to save David by blaming Bathsheba.

Beyond Bathsheba

The story of Bathsheba is not unique in the OT. There is a culture of the abuse of women throughout it. Stories of rape (Gen 34; Judg 19; 2 Sam 13) and kidnapping (Judg 21) are recorded. Also, prophetic literature uses the image of sexual violence as a metaphor for God's judgment (Hos 1–3; Ezek 16, 23; Nah 3:4–7).[22] Proverbs often portrays the woman as a danger to young men, seeking to lead them astray (Prov 6:20–35, 7:1–27, 30:20).

How are we to understand these narratives of sexual assault? A male dominated society permeates the OT as well as the ancient Near East. These texts are to be read as descriptive of the culture of that time. They are not meant to be prescriptive—for that historical period or for ours. A woman had little protection outside of being attached to a man, either as a wife or a concubine. As a result, she was subordinate to a male, often her father or her husband. The sexuality of the woman was guarded primarily to protect the man's progeny. On the other hand, in this culture, the man seems to have been afforded more sexual freedom.

> While a woman could be sentenced to death for both fornication and adultery, extramarital sex for men was tolerated, so long as another man's rights were not infringed. The male desire for more than one sexual partner was catered for not just by the concession of polygamous marriage, but also through concubinage and prostitution.[23]

So, while Bathsheba may be interrogated for her actions and inactions, David may be excused by saying "boys will be boys" or "Bathsheba should have guarded herself from tempting David." This is part of a rape culture that is "perpetuated through use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women's rights and safety."[24]

Victim Blaming and the Church Today

In modern times, Bathsheba could be a part of the #MeToo movement, having been taken advantage of by a man in authority. Diane Langberg, in her book *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, goes as far as calling David "Bathsheba's Harvey Weinstein."[25] Her study deals with abuse within the church. The response is often to cover up the abuse and protect the abusers. Langberg notes that they are "preserving an institution rather than the humans meant to flourish in it."[26]

Likewise, in the process of protecting the institution, the victim is often blamed:

> What did you do to encourage it?
> What were you wearing?
> Why did you go to . . . ?
> Why didn't you yell or try to get away?

The inclination to blame the victim for what she did or did not do is, in part, due to people wanting to assure themselves that if they follow the rules, sexual assault will not happen to them. As one writer puts it, "It is easier to blame someone for their harm than it is to accept that it could *happen to anyone*."[27] For the victim, however, such shaming only increases self-doubt and self-incrimination.

Kristen Kobes Du Mez speaks to how such a culture develops in the church in her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. Emphasizing the male role as head of the house and head of the church, she states that

rugged, outspoken male leadership is often held up as the ideal in the church: "The evangelical cult of masculinity links patriarchal power to masculine aggression and sexual desire; its counterpoint is a submissive femininity."[28] While men are praised for their testosterone-driven leadership, women are to avoid tempting men outside of marriage with immodesty or by seeming to be available.

Caught up in an authoritarian setting where a premium is placed on obeying men, women and children find themselves in situations ripe for the abuse of power. Yet victims are often held culpable for acts perpetrated against them; in many cases, female victims, even young girls, are accused of seducing their abusers or inviting abuse by failing to exhibit proper femininity. While men (and women) invested in defending patriarchal authority frequently come to the defense of perpetrators, victims are often pressured to forgive abusers and avoid involving law enforcement.[29]

Viewing the David and Bathsheba narrative in such a light, Bathsheba is at fault because she does not protect David from being tempted by her beauty.

In May 2022, the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) Executive Committee released a third-party report on sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches. For years the Convention had avoided such a study, saying it did not have authority over local churches. Yet, in cases of sexual abuse, certain Convention leaders sought to blame the victims. One of the leaders of the cover-up, David August "Auggie" Boto, said: "The whole thing should be seen for what it is—a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism. It is not Gospel. It is a misdirection play."[30] Victims who came forward to speak up were often blamed and portrayed in unflattering ways in the Convention-owned Baptist Press and other SBC social media.[31] A 205-page list of abusers was also released in May, with 703 names, 409 of which have served at SBC-affiliated churches.[32]

In an earlier article in the *Houston Chronicle* exposing sexual abuse in SBC churches, one writer commented: "Yet the SBC had a record of promptly 'removing from fellowship' churches that hired female pastors, even as it appeared unable to discipline those that hired known sex offenders."[33] This brings us to another aspect of abuse within the church: even women who serve in ministerial roles are not immune from unwanted advances and sexual harassment by men in the church. Anecdotally, it has been explained to me that a woman cannot be in the pulpit because her breasts may distract the men in the congregation. So once again, the woman is held responsible for a man's ability—or better, inability—to control his own libido. Katie Lauve-Moon, in her book *Preacher Woman: A Critical Look at Sexism Without Sexists*, writes that women in ministry are often held to higher accountability than their male counterparts: called to be feminine but not too feminine, masculine but not too masculine.[34] She remarks, "Women pastors' bodies and expressions of femininity were also treated as the object of male congregants' attraction. In contrast to women congregants who expected the women pastors to not sexualize their bodies, men in the congregation did the exact opposite."[35] Women ministers are expected to change, but the congregations' attitudes toward women are not supposed to change.[36] Women ministers are blamed in order to save the institution. So, I come back to the question I started with: *Why is there a need to save David at the cost of blaming Bathsheba*?

Conclusion

In 1952, Kitty Wells sang J. D. Miller's "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels," which deals with the result of abusive relationships. The second verse puts it this way:

> It's a shame that all the blame is on us women;
> It's not true that only you men feel the same.
> From the start most every heart that's ever broken
> Was because there always was a man to blame.

While the examples I have used reflect the abuse in conservative churches steeped in patriarchy, such abuse occurs in moderate and progressive churches as well. When such abuse is exposed, the response of many has been to save the institution at the cost of the victim. Actions taken in the pulpit and by the church need to emphasize male responsibility in sexual abuse and raise the voices of the abused, who often are blamed. While the OT often describes women as second-class citizens, treated as property with little to no rights, this is descriptive of the culture of the ancient Near East and should not be emulated in the church today. Sermons need to be preached about the lack of rights these women had, including Bathsheba. Even more importantly, the church should be a place in which victims feel free to share about their abuse without blame. The abused need to be more important than the institutions.

Notes

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1. The World Health Organization describes sexual assault as "actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions." See: "Sexual Exploitation and Abuse" pamphlet at https://who.int.
2. Cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981) 76. Alter states that 2 Sam 10 provides the context for the "king's moral biography," including its "political and moral ramifications."
3. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, 1985) 191–94. The king is placed in ironic contrast with the others by the narrator's use of ambiguity, by not telling the reader why the king is not with the others.
4. Herschel M. Levine, "Irony and Morality in Bathsheba's Tragedy," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal* 32 (1975) 70. Cf. Gale A. Yee, "'Fraught with Background': Literary Ambiguity in II Samuel 11," *Int* 42 (1988). Yee, 242–43, includes three other reasons, besides irony, for David not going. First, the death of David could be demoralizing to the army (cf. 2 Sam 21:15–17). Second, siege work was too tedious to involve the king. Finally, David could have been too old.
5. The conclusion is also a transition to 2 Sam 12, and the first phrase in 12:1 is: "The LORD sent Nathan to David."
6. Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12* (JSOT, 1990) 86. Bailey believes the verb "to send" with Bathsheba as the subject is a sign of authority.
7. Kyle P. McCarter, *II Samuel*, AB 9 (Doubleday, 1980) 289. Cf. Hirsch H. Cohen, "David and Bathsheba," *JBR* 33 (1965) 142–48. Cohen does a psychological profile of David in 2 Sam 11–12. David may have been suffering from "retirement neurosis" in 2 Sam 11. Having reached the prime of his career, he might have needed something to reassure his masculinity.

8. The story is not concerned with Bathsheba's guilt or innocence but with David's guilt. Cf. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 288.
9. Cf. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Almond, 1983) 27: "She is not even a minor character, but simply a part of the plot." See also, R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative* (Alec R. Allenson, 1968). Whybray, 40, notes that Bathsheba is used throughout the succession narratives: by David (2 Sam 11), by Nathan (1 Kgs 1), and by Adonijah (1 Kgs 2).
10. Joyce Hollyday, "Voices Out of the Silence," *Sojourners* 15 (1986). Hollyday does not see 2 Sam 11–12 as David's "Great Sin" but as Bathsheba's "Great Loss" (21).
11. Bathsheba was not merely a beautiful woman (v. 2); she is also the wife of Uriah (v. 3) and thus not available to David. Still, she becomes David's wife in the end (v. 27). Cf. Yee, "Fraught with Background," 245.
12. Even in Matt 1:6 she is referred to as "the wife of Uriah." Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (John Knox, 1990) 273–78.
13. Cf. Lev 15:25–30. This would be approximately fourteen days after the start of her menstrual cycle.
14. George P. Ridout, "Prose Compositional Techniques in the Succession Narrative (2 Sam. 7, 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2)," (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1971) 67.
15. Levine, "Irony and Morality," 74.
16. Yee, "Fraught with Background," 240. Yee defines narrative ambiguity as "a deliberate stylistic device which engages the reader, seizes the imaginative processes, and creates an interaction with the characters of the story that a more explicitly detailed account does not allow to happen." See also Levine, "Irony and Morality," 69. See also Sternberg, *Poetics*, 186–229. In his chapter "Gaps, Ambiguity, and the Reading Process," Sternberg uses 2 Sam 11 as the major pericope for the study of ambiguity. The narrator is "omniscient but far from omnicommunicative" (190).
17. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 191.
18. Sara M. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018).
19. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*, 1–2.
20. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*, 8–9.
21. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*, 52.
22. Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Fortress, 2012) 136–39. Seibert provides several examples of these metaphors.
23. Niamh M. Middleton, "The Portrayal of Women in the Old Testament," ch. 2 in *Jesus and Women: Beyond Feminism* (Lutterworth, 2021) 23.
24. "Rape Culture, Victim Blaming, and the Facts," Southern Connecticut State University, https://inside.southernct.edu/sexual-misconduct/facts.
25. Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Brazos, 2020) 98.
26. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 78. See also Mark Wingfield, "Prominent Arkansas SBC Church Accused of Hiding Knowledge of Former Staff Member's Abuse of Child," *Baptist Global News* (Dec 12, 2023). The story shares how the church attempted to conceal and deal internally with accusations of sexual abuse in the church. The article also shows how this church's actions are similar to other instances of cover-up of sexual abuse in other churches and institutions.
27. James Whiting, "How Denial and Victim Blaming Keep Sexual Assault Perpetrators, Communities, and Even Victims Get Caught in the Webs that Hide Abuse," *Psychology Today* (Jan 16, 2019).
28. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, J*esus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2020) 277.
29. Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 277.
30. Andrew Wolfson, "Report: Southern Baptist Executive Smeared Louisville Victim Advocate of 'Satanic Scheme,'" *Louisville Courier-Journal* (May 24, 2022).
31. The SBC recently resolved a court case involving sexual abuse of young men by Paul Pressler, an architect in the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC. Among documents disclosed in the case, it was discovered that the "SBC defense philosophy [was] of delay, filing a multitude of motions and blaming the victim." Mark Wingfield, "Law Firm Representing Rollins against Pressler Comments on the Abuse Case," *Baptist News Global* (Jan 10, 2024).
32. Wolfson, "Report."
33. "Abuse of Faith," *Houston Chronicle*, https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/abuse-of-faith/database/.
34. Katie Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman: A Critical Look at Sexism Without Sexists* (Oxford University Press, 2021).
35. Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman*, 109.
36. Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman*, 108.

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