

Vindicating Bathsheba

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Boast no more so very proudly,
Do not let arrogance come out of your mouth;
For the LORD is a God of knowledge,
And with Him actions are weighed.
1 Samuel 2:3¹

The evangelical church is in an “age of reckoning.”² Russell Moore described the recently revealed sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention as an “apocalypse.”³

How did we get here? In recent years, some sources have explored powerful celebrity pastors who have abused and controlled others for their own fame and fortune.⁴ In hindsight, we can often see a lack of character in certain aspects of their lives.⁵ However, in light of the revelation of sexual abuse by leaders who, seemingly, acted as though they were truly devoted to the Lord, we must grapple with the reality that no one is immune from sin.⁶ The Bible tells us about a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14, cf. Acts 13:22) who committed these same abuses of power: David.

¹Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David stayed at Jerusalem.

²Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king’s house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. ³So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” ⁴David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. ⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, “I am pregnant.” (2 Sam 11:1–5)

Tragically, unfounded accusations have been lobbed at Bathsheba, with devastating consequences. Though refusing the king was not a viable option, especially since her husband and “all Israel” (2 Sam 11:1) had gone away, scholars, pastors, and popular resources have subjected her to all manner of speculation. There was no one to protect Bathsheba or come to her aid when David determined to take her. Yet, assertions blaming the victim proliferate, thus establishing social mores that allow predators to flourish.

The speculation surrounding the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11–12 has contributed to a culture in the church where certain male leaders are given near-absolute power, while women are dehumanized and silenced. Contrarily, if we wish to create

a culture within the church where women and men thrive as equals, we must actively promote an interpretation of the story of David and Bathsheba that affirms Bathsheba’s innocence by acknowledging the imbalance of power between them.

Torah Observance in OT Narrative

To remedy these problems, the first step is recognizing that OT narrative must be interpreted in light of the Torah. In any given story, the characters that followed the directives of the Torah were righteous, while characters who operated against the guidance of the Torah were unrighteous.⁷ In 2 Sam 11:1–5, Bathsheba was the Torah-following, upright player, while David succumbed to the allure of power and thus opposed the Torah.

The purpose of this narrative is to describe David’s sin and turning point. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are one literary unit detailing the rise and fall of Saul and then of David.⁸ This episode is the critical turning point in David’s story. Within 2 Sam 11–12, the author utilized a chiasmic structure to emphasize the key point:⁹ “the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Sam 11:27). He was the one corrupted by power, taking advantage of the vulnerable and using those close to him to cover it up.

The actions in this narrative were driven by David.¹⁰ He “saw” (*ra’ah*) someone who was “good/beautiful” (*tov*), “and he took” (*laqakh*) her. Second Samuel 11 recapitulates Gen 3. In the garden, the woman “saw” (*ra’ah*) something that was “good/beautiful” (*tov*), “and she took” (*laqakh*) it.¹¹ David directly opposed Torah instruction by coveting his neighbor’s wife and committing adultery (Exod 20:14, 17; 2 Sam 11:2, 4). Continuing the recapitulation of Gen 3, David attempted to cover and hide his sins. He called Uriah back from the war, hoping that Uriah would sleep with Bathsheba and obscure David’s misdeed. However, Uriah refused (1 Sam 21:5, cf. Lev 15:18, Deut 23:10). Escalating the attempts to hide his trespasses, David again scorned the law of God by ordering the death of Uriah (Exod 20:13, 2 Sam 11:14–15).

The Israelites had been warned that the king would “take” (*laqakh*) the “best” (*tov*) of all they had. In 1 Sam 8, Israel gathered and said to Samuel:

“... appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.”
... The LORD said to Samuel: “Listen to the voice of the people . . . they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. . . . solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them.” (1 Sam 8:5b–9)

Thus, Samuel warned the people: The king will “take your sons” (8:11), “take your daughters” (8:13), “take the best [*tov*] of your fields and your vineyards and your olive groves” (8:14), “take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards” (8:15), “take your male servants and your female servants and your best young men and your donkeys” (8:16), “take a tenth of your flocks,” and finally, “you yourselves will become his servants” (8:17).

Even with this warning, “the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said ‘No, but there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles’” (1 Sam 8:19–20). David became the king who takes.¹²

Another significant action performed by David is that he “sent” (*shalakh*) others to do his bidding.¹³ He “sent” Joab and “all Israel” to fight his battle, contra to what the people were hoping a king would do for them. He “sent” messengers to inquire about the woman, then “sent” them to bring Bathsheba to him. He “sent” to Joab to request that Uriah be “sent” to David, a request which was granted. When plots to manipulate Uriah proved unsuccessful, David “sent” a message to Joab instructing that Uriah perish in battle. After Bathsheba mourned her husband, David “sent” for her to become his wife. David was the one with power and authority. The warning from 1 Sam 8:17 was fulfilled: all Israel became his servants, obeying whatever he sent them to do. Not even Joab, the commander of the army, dared to defy David’s suspect instructions. All the people were subject to their king, as Samuel had warned.

The few actions Bathsheba performed, on the other hand, were Torah-positive (2 Sam 11:2, 4, 5, 26). First, she was “bathing” as part of a religious exercise, a ritual cleansing. When David sent for her, she went with the messengers. After David took her, she “purified herself from her uncleanness” and “returned to her house.” When she discovered she was pregnant, she sent word notifying David of the situation. Finally, after her husband died, she mourned for him. Her actions were in line with Torah instruction, and there is no indication that she intended or even consented to engage in sex with David.

In 2 Sam 11:2 we read, “Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king’s house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance.” His reasons for meandering to-and-fro¹⁴ on his roof that evening remain a mystery to the modern reader.¹⁵ What we do know is that David “saw” (*ra’ah*) a woman who was “very” (*me’od*) “beautiful/good/the best” (*tov*). This phrase is descriptive and does not indicate a flaunting of beauty. The tree in the garden was “good” (*tov*, Gen 3:6). Rebekah, as a more similar example, was described as “very” (*me’od*) “beautiful” (*tov*, Gen 24:16) while she was simply carrying a jug to draw water (Gen 24:15).

In our introduction to Bathsheba, we see one who is living as a righteous follower of Torah: she was bathing. In Leviticus, the Torah instructs that a woman

shall continue in her menstrual impurity for seven days. . . . Everything also on which she lies . . . and

everything on which she sits shall be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until evening. (Lev 15:19–21)

Due to this directive, evening was a normal time for women to bathe from menstrual impurity. Additionally, ritual purification included washing clothes and bedding. This may have been done in private courtyards or publicly, near the water source.¹⁶ Since communities in the ancient Near East were communal, there is a possibility that women worked together to perform these duties. David may have observed a group of women bathing themselves and doing laundry. Whether or not she was in a group, Bathsheba was indeed going about her monthly routine, faithfully following the law of the Torah. This adherence to the teachings of Torah illustrates her position as one who is righteous.

Some sources, however, assert that Bathsheba bathed with the intent to seduce David.¹⁷ One scholar goes so far as to claim that she intentionally “moved in next door” to King David for the express purpose of exposing herself to him in a bid to improve her social status.¹⁸ This speculative reading neglects the importance of her familial credentials listed in 2 Sam 11:3: “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” Bathsheba was someone’s daughter. Bathsheba was someone’s wife. To an English speaker’s ears, “Bathsheba” sounds like a play on words related to her bathing. But *bath/bat* in Hebrew means “daughter.” The Hebrew says *bath-sheba bath-eliam esheth uriyah* (“ . . . wife of Uriah”). “Daughter . . . daughter . . . wife.” It was significant for a woman’s patronymic to be included,¹⁹ and this set of three familial names in a row is emphatic. Her father, Eliam, and her husband, Uriah, were both among David’s mighty men (2 Sam 23:34, 39). Eliam’s father was Ahithophel, one of David’s advisors (2 Sam 15:12, 23:34). Furthermore, she was not only someone’s daughter, she was “the best” (*tov*) of daughters. Bathsheba was an upstanding citizen who belonged to a significant family. There is no indication that she was seeking to improve her socioeconomic status through seduction.

After inquiring about her, “David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her” (2 Sam 11:4a). David “sent” messengers and “took” her.²⁰ Both verbs, “sent” and “took,” are grammatically masculine and singular; both were performed by David. In the Hebrew, the term “came to” (feminine singular) was performed by Bathsheba. Since the text explicitly states, “and he lay” (masculine singular), the proper interpretation of “she came to him” is simply that she literally walked with the messengers to the palace. “She came to him” does not signify mutuality or consent to the intercourse. Messengers arrived with instructions from the king to go to the palace, and she complied.

Interestingly, certain Greek manuscripts of 2 Samuel read “he went in to her” where English Bibles (representing the Hebrew text) have “she came to him.”²¹ It appears that the Greek translators, or perhaps a Hebrew reading now lost to us, understood the actions to be David’s and thus clearly stated that this was David’s sin and that Bathsheba was not a consenting, independent agent. Moreover, the introduction to Ps 51 indicates that it is “a Psalm of David . . . after *he had gone in to Bathsheba*” (italics added).

The Psalm also specifies masculine singular action. There is no indication that Bathsheba moved sexually toward David. The focus is on David's exploitation of Bathsheba. He "saw" a woman who was "beautiful," he "sent" for her, he "took" her, and he "lay with" her.

Second Samuel 11:4 continues: "and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house." Grammatically, the participle "she had purified herself" is reflexive, self-directed, hence the presence of "herself" in English translation. This participle is feminine and singular, leaving no doubt that the action was performed by Bathsheba, not David. The phrase can rightly be translated parenthetically, referring to v. 2, as in the NIV: "(Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness)," or as in the NASB, as a new action: "and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness." The ambiguity of the grammar in Hebrew leaves the timing of the action open for interpretation.

The Torah sheds light on why Bathsheba may have purified herself after intercourse: "If a man lies with a woman so that there is a seminal emission, they shall both bathe in water and be unclean until evening" (Lev 15:18). Ever religious, Bathsheba followed Torah instruction to purify herself after copulation. She was likely purifying herself from uncleanness both at the beginning of the story and again after David took her, an interpretation supported by the fact that the verb is a participle and can indicate a process. At no point does the narrative indicate that she stopped being purified. Finally, "she returned to her house." She did not try to secure a place in the palace, as suggested by some sources.²²

When she discovered that she had conceived, she sent a message to David: "I am pregnant" (2 Sam 11:5). It is a simple statement of fact. Some sources insist she should have notified Uriah instead of David,²³ but this suggestion ignores that Bathsheba likely did not have authority to send a message to the battlefield. It fails to account for the cultural context. She was a Torah-observant woman in a Torah-observant community and recognized that she could be killed if the king did not intervene and take responsibility for his actions: "if a man is found sleeping with a married woman, then both of them shall die" (Deut 22:22).

Guilt and Consequences

The Lord saw David's evil actions and sent Nathan who confronted him with a parable about a rich man representing King David, a poor man representing Uriah the Hittite, and a ewe lamb representing Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (2 Sam 12:1-4). One would expect David, the shepherd king, to fiercely protect the "sheep" entrusted to him (1 Sam 17:34-36). Scholars concur that, "in the ancient Near East, the king was to protect the socially weak." Thus, his "crime involved an abuse of power."²⁴

Paradoxically, it was the Hittite, not the Israelite king, who was the good shepherd. The "poor man," Uriah, "nourished" the one in his care. He brought her in, fed her from his own table, and loved her as a daughter (2 Sam 12:3). This use of "daughter," *bath*, recalls Bathsheba's name and familial credentials in 11:3. Illustrating Bathsheba as a "ewe lamb" further proves her innocence, since

ewe lambs were used for sacrifices of purification (Lev 14:10), and corroborates the premise that Bathsheba was purified from uncleanness throughout and beyond the story (2 Sam 11:4). Even after being taken, she was referred to as a symbol of purity and as a daughter. Bathsheba was not cast out of the community. She continued to belong in and to her family. To emphasize this connection, later passages refer to Bathsheba as the "wife of Uriah" (2 Sam 12:10, Matt 1:6).

Upon hearing Nathan's story, David, for the first time in this narrative, revealed a desire to follow Torah instruction, saying: "he must make restitution for the lamb fourfold" (Exod 22:1, 2 Sam 12:6). Nathan declared: "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:7). David realized he had "sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam 12:13). As recorded in Ps 51, David called upon the compassion of the Lord, requesting to be cleansed from his sin. David's life was spared, but his son died instead (2 Sam 12:13-14). The death of the infant was a consequence of David's sin; the child died instead of him.²⁵ It was not a punishment or indictment of Bathsheba, as suggested by a notable Christian educator and pastor.²⁶

Further, Nathan shared that "the sword shall never depart from your house" and that the Lord would "raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun" (2 Sam 12:10-12).

As foretold, Absalom, David's son, conspired to usurp the throne and drove David out of Jerusalem. He appointed Ahithophel, Bathsheba's grandfather and David's former counselor, as his own advisor (2 Sam 15:12). On Ahithophel's advice, Absalom "pitched a tent . . . on the roof," the very roof where David espied Bathsheba, "and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel" (2 Sam 16:21-22).

David's sins could not be hidden from God, nor were his actions free from consequences. Jesus said, "There is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops" (Luke 12:2-3). Beginning in the garden (Gen 3), the sins of humanity have reverberated throughout history. Paul wrote, "Just as through one human being sin came into the world, and death came through sin, so death has come to everyone, since everyone has sinned" (Rom 5:12 CEB). David's secret rape of Bathsheba directly led to the public rape of ten other women (2 Sam 15:16). Sin begets sin. All humans, no matter how devoted to the Lord they appear, continue to pridefully "take" what seems "best/good/beautiful" to them, continually spreading death to others.

One further theme of 1 and 2 Samuel is that the Lord exalts the poor and humble and brings low the rich and powerful (1 Sam 2:7-8). Bathsheba was lowly and mourning after the loss of her husband and infant. However, God exalted her by providing a son, Solomon, a king who would be included in the messianic line. It was not through her own striving that she and her son became exalted;²⁷ rather, it was Nathan who initiated

the conversation to ensure Solomon's kingship (1 Kgs 1:11–14). Ultimately, God remembered her, cared for her, and redeemed the situation.

The Church's Response

The tale of David and Bathsheba reminds us of the sins of humanity reverberating, recapitulating throughout history. It reminds us that sin cannot be hidden from the Lord, and that he exalts the humble by redeeming what has been broken. Instead of emphasizing these points, however, many evangelicals have weaponized this story to promote the "virtue" of women's modesty. They have ignored the power dynamics at play, thus silencing victims of abuse by church leaders. They have exalted the powerful, and further oppressed the weak.

One popular author exhorts:

For our safety, we women need to try to keep the men around us from temptation. Unfortunately, as we know, we can cause lust in a man, without realizing it. But we need to take responsibility for anything we might do to cause trouble.²⁸

A pastoral resource ponders: "Although David was to confess that his foul sin was his, and his alone, one wonders how far Bathsheba was the accomplice in such a sin, as well as its provocation." This same author then suggests Bathsheba should have been more "careful" and "modest."²⁹ When women are taught that they can cause men to sin by their mere existence, they live in constant fear that they will cause someone else to fall into sin. Women become mere objects of temptation to be hidden away, rather than fully human image-bearers of God. The charge to constantly be "careful" and "modest" plants seeds of deep anxiety in faithful believers. When women pour all their attention into protecting men from temptation, and themselves from potential sexual assault, no one thrives.

Another malformed application is that a woman, or anyone confronted with unwanted sexual advances, needs to "just say no."³⁰ This application neglects the power imbalance between a king and a subject in the text and the power imbalance between a religious leader and a congregant in the modern context. In situations where one party is stronger and more powerful and determines to abuse, even rape, the other, it does not matter whether the weaker party says "no." They will be coerced or forcibly overtaken. This directive discourages victims from coming forward and assures them that if they speak up in the church, their concerns will be dismissed. It also fills the soul of the weaker party with guilt over not having been able to prevent the assault.

In the same vein, some suggest Bathsheba should not have told David about the pregnancy.³¹ This approach to the text discourages victims from holding perpetrators accountable. We are concerned about damaging the reputation of our leaders and their ministries, so we assist them in hiding their sins. Encouraging a lack of accountability enables abusers to target new victims; indeed, it actively protects sexual predators and furthers their impunity.

Like those who have gone before us, we may think we—rather than Christ—can determine what is good. We, as church communities, commit the same error the Israelites made in 1 Sam 8. We reject Jesus as king and appoint for ourselves new "kings" to do the work that we are called to do ourselves. Even when we choose a leader based on their heart, like David, we discover that seemingly gentle and humble people are capable of committing such heinous acts as sexual abuse (1 Sam 16:7, cf. Matt 11:29). When news breaks that one of our "sages in the way of Jesus had been a serial sexual abuser,"³² we must turn to the story of David, who used his power to take what was not rightfully his. Over and over, no matter how many "good" things an individual does, across time and culture, humanity demonstrates that "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23). Nevertheless, we hand other broken, human agents exceptional power by giving them our blind trust. We go where we are sent, following their instructions and never doubting their motivations. We assist them in covering up their sins to "protect" God's reputation.

God does not need his reputation protected. He included all the horrible things his followers did in the Bible! The story of David and Bathsheba is not about being more modest, or about exhorting the weak to resist the strong, or about maintaining the illusion of a religious leader's perfection. It is to remind us that even someone after God's own heart, someone who seemingly did everything right, was not immune from the sins of humanity. It reminds us of our own sins, our own lust for power and significance. This story should lead us to the cross.

If we truly want to cultivate a culture in our church where women and men thrive as equals, we must stop blaming victims. We must listen when someone comes forward, believe that they are acting in good faith, and investigate. No matter how we perceive the accused, we must not dismiss charges flippantly. We need to hold people accountable for their own actions, instead of expecting women to take responsibility for the purity of the men around them. We need to stop cruel speculation of Bathsheba, which signals to victims, and potential victims, that the church is not a safe place.

Finally, we must stop demanding and expecting perfection from our leaders, which creates pressure to cover up every error. No one is without temptation, brokenness, and sin. Rather than attempting to hide these things, we must bring to light our own community's frailty and transgressions. We must proclaim from the housetops that we are sinners and need a Savior. We must shout it from the rooftops that we all need Jesus, and he alone is our king.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the 1995 NASB. A "literal" translation is best for making clear certain aspects of this article that are based on details of Hebrew wording.

2. Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb* (Thomas Nelson, 2021) 143.

3. Russell Moore, "This is the Southern Baptist Apocalypse," *CT* (May 22, 2022), <https://christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-web-only/southern-baptist-abuse-apocalypse-russell-moore.html>.

4. See Goggin and Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*; Erik Petrik, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, CT*, podcast audio (June 2021), <https://christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>; Jennifer McKinney, "Sects and Gender: Reaction and Resistance to Cultural Change," *Priscilla Papers* 29/4 (Autumn 2015) 15–25; Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Tyndale Momentum, 2020).

5. Kyle Strobel, Introduction to Spiritual Theology and Formation class lecture, Talbot School of Theology (Fall 2021).

6. Goggin and Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*, 152.

7. Brandon Cash, Hermeneutics and Bible Study Methods class lecture, Talbot School of Theology (Fall 2021).

8. Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, NAC 7 (Broadman & Holman, 1996) 17.

9. Ronald F. Youngblood, *1 and 2 Samuel*, rev ed., EBC (Zondervan, 2009) 3.

10. P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, AB 9 (Doubleday, 1984) 288; Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 364.

11. Zach Zienka, personal conversation, May 13, 2022.

12. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 290.

13. V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, TOTC 8 (InterVarsity, 2020) 360.

14. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 361.

15. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 289.

16. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 364.

17. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (InterVarsity, 2008) 40; Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1991) 35; Harold J. Ockenga, *Women Who Made Bible History* (Zondervan, 1962) 114; Ruth A. Tucker, *Dynamic Women of the Bible* (Baker, 2014) 170.

18. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 41.

19. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 285.

20. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 361.

21. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 279.

22. Tucker, *Dynamic Women*, 171; Lockyer, *All the Women*, 35.

23. Ockenga, *Women Who Made Bible History*, 115; Liz Curtis Higgs, *Really Bad Girls of the Bible* (WaterBrook, 2007) 158; Kathy Collard Miller, *Women of the Bible* (Starburst, 1999) 216.

24. V. Philips Long, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel* (Zondervan, 2009) 459; Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2003) 540–41.

25. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 373.

26. Ockenga, *Women Who Made Bible History*, 115–16.

27. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 288.

28. Miller, *Women of the Bible*, 216.

29. Lockyer, *All the Women*, 35.

30. Higgs, *Really Bad Girls of the Bible*, 158.

31. Higgs, *Really Bad Girls of the Bible*, 158; Ockenga, *Women Who Made Bible History*, 115; Miller, *Women of the Bible*, 216.

32. Goggin and Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*, 143.

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—Paul, Chilcote, Ashland Seminary

