

AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF 2 SAMUEL 11-12

There is little doubt that the story of David takes a significant turn in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

Whereas in 2 Samuel 1-10 David is seen successfully securing his throne and enjoying public triumph, in 2 Samuel 13 and beyond, David's rule seems to have spun out of control. Rather than simply providing the reader with evaluative comments as to the reason for this shift, the writer crafts a masterful narrative in chapters 11 and 12 filled with thematic words, powerful dialogue, significant ambiguities, and intriguing characterizations. It is in unpacking these narrative elements that one is driven to a clearer understanding of just what the narrator intended to communicate to his immediate audience¹ and to the generation that we now find ourselves a part.

David sends Joab to defeat Rabbah (11:1)²

When chapter 10 closes, the Ammonites are shown retreating to the city of Rabbah after encountering substantial losses at the hands of David's army. Apparently, David chose not to besiege Rabbah immediately and instead waited until the spring of the next year at which time he sent Joab and his troops to battle. Much has been made of David's choice to remain in Jerusalem, with the implication that it was improper for a king not to accompany his men in battle. But this was not the first time that David did not personally lead the army (2 Samuel 2:12-32, 10:7-14), nor was it completely uncommon for kings of surrounding nations to send subordinates to fight their battles (cf. 2 Kings 18:17-35). The more

¹ There is no clear evidence pointing to the date of composition, which would give the present day reader a better understanding of just who made up the immediate audience. A reference to the "kings of Judah" (1 Samuel 27:6) and the lack of any mention of the fall of Samaria, suggest to some that the book's composition falls between 930 and 722 BC. Those who argue for a "Deuteronomistic History" would suggest a later date, but ultimately there is no evidence that provides certainty as to its date. See David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 144-145.

² The divisions of the text presented throughout this paper are explained by the passage's chiasmic structure as presented in the discussion of v. 11:27b. They represent the major scenes in the text, although it is possible to divide the text into smaller units.

important question that arises is should David *at this time* have stayed home? Based on the contrast painted by David's station at home and the position of all Israel (as well as other kings) on the front, the narrator would appear to imply that regardless of whether such actions were wholly right or wrong the geographic separation had some bearing, if only circumstantially, on the events that are to follow.

David sleeps with Bathsheba, who becomes pregnant (11:2-5)

After setting the stage in Jerusalem and creating space between David and his men, the narrator moves the action along considerably. In the span of but four verses, David sees a woman bathing, investigates her identity, confirms that she is married to one of his honored fighting men, has her brought to his palace, sleeps with her, and impregnates her. The sweeping and sudden nature of these events certainly provides a jolt to the reader who previously had seen little for which to fault David.

The reason why David pursued Bathsheba is rarely debated -- "the woman was very beautiful" -- but what can be said of Bathsheba? Some argue that she was the victim of the king's desires,³ while others suggest that she was at the very least negligent if not a deceptive seeker of royal position.⁴ But all such argumentation goes beyond what the narrator supplies, and had the writer wanted to share Bathsheba's feelings or motives, he could have. Rather than disparage the author's ambiguity or develop creative solutions, the reader should accept it for what it does, namely keep the focus on David. He is the one whom the story is about.⁵

³ See J. Cheryl Exum, "Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted," *Semeia* 74 (1996): 49-51; Moshe Garsiel, "The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993), 255-256.

⁴ See George G. Nicol, "Bathsheba, A Clever Woman," *Expository Times* 99 (1988), 360-363; Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 250.

⁵ This is not to say that Bathsheba is a "complete non-person" as Berlin would suggest, only that her action is included only as it bears on the life of David. See Adele Berlin, "Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982), 73.

In looking at David in this passage, one cannot help but notice the rather remarkable loss of power that David experiences in the span of what was likely but a couple weeks. This loss of power can be traced through the word "sent." In verse 1, David *sends* Joab and all Israel to battle; in verse 2, he *sends* one to inquire of the woman; and in verse 4, he *sends* for Bathsheba. Through the repetitive use of this simple verb, the narrator characterizes David as the one who was in control, whether over noble national purposes, or personal pleasure-seeking pursuits.⁶ Such control should not surprise the reader, for kings had always exercised such prerogative. But at the end of all this sending, the tables are turned, and it is Bathsheba who does the sending. She sends the message, "I am pregnant," (which are her only words in the text), and by doing so puts David in a position where he is no longer fully in control.⁷

David has Uriah killed (11:6-17)

David could confess his sin at this point, but such a confession would cause considerable damage to his honor, and subsequently the loyalty and morale of his fighting men. Finding a solution was a must in David's mind, and time was of the essence as Bathsheba was soon to "show" the secret. Having not lost all his power David *sends* for Uriah with the intention of framing him with the pregnancy. His excuse for calling Uriah from the front line was to bring news of the war (v. 7.a), but the absence of any of dialogue concerning such news reveals that David could care less about any battle report.⁸ What David wanted was for Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba. This, as we see by the text, was easier said⁹ than done.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: John Knox, 1999), 182.

⁷ Ibid, 183; Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 274.

⁸ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 232.

⁹ In telling Uriah to go home and "wash your feet," there is reason to believe that David was subtly suggesting that Uriah enjoy sexual activity with his wife as "feet" are euphemistically used elsewhere to describe genitals. See A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 11 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 154; Gale A. Yee, "Fraught with Background: Literary Ambiguity in 2 Samuel 11," *Interpretation* 42 (1988), 245.

Uriah, although one of David's mighty men, is presented as David's unsuspecting¹⁰ archrival in this scene. Surely this is the case because of his refusal to "go down to his house" (a phrase that appears four times in the text) and sleep with his wife, but also so because of all that Uriah represents in antithesis to David. First, he is a Hittite; thus, while his name (which means "Yahweh is the light"¹¹) suggests that he was a God-fearing man, he was no natural born son. Second, lest we forget, he was Bathsheba's husband, which is what David definitely was not. Third, he was concerned about honoring God and the present position of the ark (v. 11a). Fourth, he felt a solidarity with his comrades that he would not dare breach (v. 11b). And finally, he was a man who was trustworthy enough to deliver the very message that would condemn him to death. It is through the ironic characterization of Uriah *the Hittite* that we see David for what he has become. Whereas before David seemed to be the sterling "man after God's own heart," now he is seen as one who still wields power (he *sends* the note to Uriah), but wields it for evil instead of good.

Joab sends David a message (11:18-27a)

In some respects, the narrator could have given his evaluation of David's actions (v. 27b) immediately following the death of Uriah as recorded in v. 17, and not included vv. 18-27. In doing so, however, the reader would not have been made aware of the far-reaching effects of David's sin or the callousness to which David's heart had succumbed. In calling Joab to put Uriah to death, he was placing Joab in a precarious position. How could Joab have Uriah killed without it looking like a set-up, and

¹⁰ Some would argue that Uriah was only unsuspecting when he arrived, and that by the second day of his return he displayed his knowledge of the plot by adamantly and specifically refusing to sleep with his wife (v. 11b). Such is a possibility, but it reads more into the text than the narrator provides and adds little in the portrayal of David, whom the account is all about. For arguments supporting Uriah's suspicion see Moshe Garsiel, "The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993), 257-258; David Marcus, *David the Deceiver and David the Dupe*, *Prooftexts* 6 (1986), 165.

¹¹ See A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 11 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 153.

without calling into question his professional skill as a commander?¹² The only solution was to avoid sending Uriah to his death alone as David had suggested (v. 15), and instead coordinate an event in which many would be killed.

The dialogue in this pericope is particularly revealing. First, in regards to Joab's instructions we see an unlikely reference to Abimelech. While we can in no way know if Joab knew of David's affair with Bathsheba at this point, nonetheless by including Joab's reference to Abimelech, the author is aligning David with another disastrous example of kingship at the hands of a woman.¹³ Second, in looking to the messenger's speech, we see that David at this stage in his reign had become a feared man, which required that only right words, with an upbeat spin, be spoken in his presence. Finally, it is David's dialogue that is perhaps most disturbing. For although he has just received news of the death of his men, he brushes it aside with what sounds like "an old soldier's cliché,"¹⁴ knowing that finally Uriah is dead.

The Lord is displeased with David (11:27b)

The sole evaluative statement in the narrative is found at the center of this story. Furthermore, it would appear that this statement sits at the apex of the thoughtfully crafted chiasm reflected below:

¹² Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 233.

¹³ Peter R. Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 105.

¹⁴ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 255.

- A. David sends Joab to defeat Rabbah (11:1)
- B. David sleeps with Bathsheba, who becomes pregnant (11:2-5)
- C. David has Uriah killed (11:6-17)
 - D. Joab sends David a message (11:18-27a)
 - E. The Lord is displeased with David (11:27b)
- D'. The Lord sends David a messenger (12:1-14)
- C'. The Lord has David's son die (12:15-23)
- B'. David sleeps with Bathsheba, who becomes pregnant (12:24-25)
- A'. Joab sends for David to defeat Rabbah (12:26-31)¹⁵

Placement of the statement, "But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the LORD," would suggest that the author's overriding concern is to make God's assessment of David known to the reader and thereby provide a reason for the ensuing decline of his reign. This is not to say, however, that the plot has reached its climax as of yet, as the author in the coming scene will narratively illustrate God's disdain.

The Lord sends David a messenger (12:1-14)

David was the one doing the sending in chapter 11, but now it is God's turn to send, and he does so in the form of his prophet, Nathan. In that kings could be unruly to prophets bringing judgment (cf. 1 Kings 22:27), Nathan does not come with a frontal attack, but rather commits David to a judgment upon himself. This is achieved through a colorful parable in which David is drawn to empathize with the loss of a sheep (something with which he was well acquainted) that had been loved and nurtured "like a daughter" by its impoverished owner. The parallel to Uriah's love for Bathsheba cannot be missed, nor can the rich man's abuse of power be viewed as anything but akin to David's. But David cannot see it, and boldly pronounces judgment -- a judgment that goes beyond the requirements of the law to express

¹⁵ Bill T. Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 531; Ronald F. Youngblood, "1,2 Samuel," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 927.

the moral outrage of the rich man's behavior.¹⁶ In doing so, David falls into Nathan's trap, which springs with the prophet's words, "You are the man!"

With David's attention surely in hand, Nathan lays out the entire verdict: David had disdained Yahweh's favor, despised the word of Lord, killed Uriah the Hittite at the hands of an unholy nation, and stolen the man's wife. The sentence that followed is not lengthy in words -- "the sword shall never depart from your house" -- but it aptly explains all that would unravel in David's days to come.

Though he could have denied Nathan's accusation or conveniently disposed of the prophet, David accepts full responsibility.¹⁷ While some might conclude that David had no option, his simple confession -- "I have sinned" -- spoken without the hint of suspicion, suggests nothing but a broken and contrite spirit. Nathan's response reflects the sincerity of David's confession, and the prophet modifies the sentence to exclude David himself from the fate of the sword. He does not, however, modify the sentence of public shame that David will endure due to his secret sin (vv. 11-12), and in fact adds to David's discipline the death of his newly born son (v. 14).

The Lord has David's son die (12:15-23)

Seemingly no sooner than Nathan had left the palace, David's son became deathly ill. It is David's response to this illness that substantiates his repentance. The king's heart-felt repentance is first illustrated by his Godward posture. Whereas in chapter 11, David seems to have been completely oblivious to God as he stepped from one sin to the next, now David is portrayed as lying before the Lord. The intent of David's prostration and fasting is made clear in v. 22, when the king states that he was

¹⁶ Anthony Phillips, "Interpretation of 2 Samuel 12:5-6," *Vetus testamentum* 16, no. 2 (1966), 243; Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 257.

¹⁷ Ronald F. Youngblood, "1,2 Samuel," *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 3*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 946.

seeking the Lord's grace. That David would even consider that God might relent suggests that his understanding of the God of long-suffering had been renewed.

The second and perhaps more powerful expression of his repentance came after the child had died. Although David's choice not to mourn most certainly was odd to servants who likely knew nothing of the curse, it provides a rather clear indication that David was finally no longer concerned about public perception. Throughout David's reign, he had always been careful to act in ways that boosted his public image, and in fact all of David's speech of chapter 11 was bent on preserving the image he had worked so long to craft.¹⁸ But now David is no longer concerned about cultural protocol; the child is dead and he has publicly accepted God's judgment.¹⁹

Finally, one must also recognize that in these verses the narrator once again portrays David as a man who had become difficult to approach. In fact in these chapters, we have seen Joab (11:20-21), Joab's messenger (11:23-24), Nathan (12:1-4), and now the servants (12:18) all act in ways that seek to deter the king's wrath. This means that David's fall was not just a momentary slip-up, but was rather the result of a disposition that was more self-centered than God-centered.

David sleeps with Bathsheba, who becomes pregnant (12:24-25)

If the previous scene portrays a genuine repentance on David's part, this scene portrays a genuine forgiveness on God's part. Despite the temporal proximity of David's fall to the conception of this child, God wholeheartedly embraces the newborn. The narrator emphasizes this point by going beyond his evaluative statement -- "Now the Lord loved him"-- and allowing Nathan to re-enter the

¹⁸ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 262.

¹⁹ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 240.

narrative to re-iterate God's affection by bestowing the name Jedidiah ("loved by the LORD").²⁰ While even more can be said about the extent of God's forgiveness in light of Solomon's future, the reader is not made aware of Solomon's succession at this point in the narrative.

Joab sends for David to defeat Rabbah (12:26-31)

In chapter 10 David had defeated the Arameans and saw to it that the Ammonites fled into their stronghold Rabbah. Since that time (probably a period of a year and a half or more), David had remained in Jerusalem. It is only now at the end of chapter 12 that David resumes direct command of his troops, and resumes the activity that had always brought him honor. But while David does indeed relive success on the battlefield (v. 31), it would appear that he now does so on different terms. Rather than being the one who *sends* troops into battle, it is he who is effectively *sent* into battle by Joab's taunt (v. 28).²¹

Lessons for Today

There are few today who would look at chapter 11 and conclude anything other than that David blew it. He had, as Nathan reminded him, so enjoyed the favor of God up to that point in time, but then was "carried away and enticed by his own lust" (James 1:14). The lust that was acted upon was not just for a woman's body, but also for that of power. David's judgment of the parabolic rich man was not so much in regards to thievery as it was in regards to the abuse of power, which is perhaps the lust we must readily guard against today, particularly if we like David stand in the position of leadership.

²⁰ Alter takes a more cynical approach and suggests that Solomon's second name signals Nathan's political expediency by aligning himself with one whom he knows God will favor. Nathan's willingness to confront David's sin, however, does not support such a motive on Nathan's part. See Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 263.

²¹ Ibid.

David's story reminds us that sin cannot be so easily contained. It is, as Paul writes (1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9), like leaven and will eventually spread such that deceit and malice must be used to cover up the original offense. Furthermore, once sin becomes uncaged, its effects will be increasingly felt by the community at large. Just as David's lust turned to adultery, adultery to deception, deception to murder, and murder to mass murder, so too our sin if unchecked will impact an ever growing number.

But sin and its dynamic nature is not all that is apparent in this passage. God cannot be mocked and so with David's sin came judgment -- a judgment that sentenced David to significant life-enduring consequences. We too must know that we will reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7), and that the only way to curb a harvest of unrighteousness is to do as David did and repent. No more excuses, no more games, just the simple words of David, "I have sinned against the Lord." With these words, David experienced forgiveness and the renewed assurance that the kingdom of which God had appointed him to be a part would not cease. This hope of forgiveness is ours as well.

Finally, this passage must be considered, if only briefly, in the context of the entire canon. David was a man. That is all he was. He could not be the king that would hold the eternal scepter (Genesis 49:10) or fill the shoes of ancient Melchizedek. No man can. It does not matter that he was a man after God's own heart; he could not be all that God's people needed him to be. That place is reserved for one, the one who is of the house of David, the one whom David himself called Lord (Psalm 110:1; Matthew 22:43). And so today, there is no name under heaven by which we can be saved other than Jesus, the sinless one, something that David, as great a king as he was, was certainly not.

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