

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 26 – Part 1

David – The Bathsheba Affair

On July 21, 1683, the University of Oxford issued a *Judgment and Decree...against certain pernicious Books, and damnable Doctrines, destructive to the sacred Persons of Princes, their State and Government, and of all human Society*. This publication was the basis for the last government-sanctioned book burning in England (also occurring in Oxford).

Among those books burned was *Lex, Rex*, written by the Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford. The book was cited by Oxford for the dangerous doctrine that “if lawful governors become tyrants, or govern otherwise than by the laws of God and man...they forfeit the right they had unto government.”¹

Rutherford’s book was alarming to the realm because even its title was against the King’s interest. *Lex* is Latin for “law,” and *Rex* is Latin for “king.” The title *Lex Rex* puts the law as over the king rather than the king over the law. Within the book, in response to the question “whether the king be above the law,” Rutherford wrote, “The law hath a supremacy of constitution above the king.”²

In part of his argument, Rutherford reached back to the Biblical account of King Saul noting,

God, in making Saul a king, doth not by any royal stamp give him a power to sin, or to play the tyrant.³

Rutherford is right for Saul, and also for his successor, King David. As we consider David in this lesson, we see that he found a time where he violated in rapid succession three of the Ten Commandments, but not without dire consequence to him and to his family. For David, as for all rulers, God’s authority trumps that of the king!

¹ *The Judgment and Decree of the University of Oxford, passed in their Convocation, July 21, 1683, against certain pernicious Books, and damnable Doctrines, destructive to the sacred Persons of Princes, their State and Government, and of all human Society*. “The Third Proposition.”

² Rutherford, Samuel, *Lex, Rex*, (1644) at Question XXVI.

³ *Ibid.*, at Question XXVI, Assertion 3.

THE STORY LINE

The story is one many know well. The story of David and Bathsheba has made its way into most every art form: plays, novels, short stories, novels, and more paintings than one could count. There are some subtleties to the story that only become apparent under a closer examination, so we consider 2 Samuel 11 in detail.

The David and Bathsheba story comes in the middle of a section of time and text where David had sent his troops to battle the Ammonites (2 Sam. 10 and 12:26-31). This war had been ongoing for a year, and as spring time rolled around, it was the time between the winter rains and the summer harvest when kings and able-bodied men typically went off to fight. This year, however, David did not lead his troops.

David sent his troops while he stayed at home taking naps in the afternoon. The troops laid siege against “Rabbah” (which is today “Amman” capital of Jordan still carrying the name of the Ammonites.)⁴ After a late afternoon nap, David was walking on the roof of his house when he spied Bathsheba bathing on her roof.

It is worth noting that typical Israelite homes of that day (and even many today) had flat roofs where people could live in a breeze absent down below in the enclosed part of their homes. David, as king, likely lived on the higher part of Jerusalem, while Bathsheba, married to one of David’s key soldiers, lived close by.

Bathsheba was bathing as required by Leviticus 15:19-24. Her husband was Uriah the Hittite. Most scholars agree that Uriah was not a Hittite immigrant, but rather of Hittite heritage from earlier generations. His name is a typical Hebrew name which means, “Yahweh is my light.”⁵ Bathsheba’s father was Eliam.

We know about both Eliam and Uriah from other places in 2 Samuel. 2 Samuel 23:34 says that Eliam was “the



This figure of a woman bathing was found at nearby Achzib and dates from the 9th to the 7th century BC. It is currently at the Israel Museum. See, King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Westminster 2001) at 70.

⁴ See, McCarter, P. Kyle, *II Samuel: The Anchor Bible*, (Doubleday 1984), at 285; Anderson, A. A, *Word Bible Commentary 2 Samuel*, (Word 1989), at 153

⁵ See, McCarter at 285.

son of Ahithophel of Gilo.” Many scholars think this is the same Ahithophel that plays a significant role later in the story of Absalom’s rebellion against David. Both Eliam and Uriah were among David’s “mighty men,” a group of thirty men that were David’s elite special forces (2 Sam. 23).

After finding out who Bathsheba was,

David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and she lay with her...then she returned to her house (2 Sam. 11:4).

It was not long before Bathsheba realized she was pregnant. She sent word to David who reacted swiftly. David sent a message to his general (Joab) instructing him to send Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, back to Jerusalem.

When Uriah arrived, he came before David. David asked,

...how Joab was doing and how the people were doing and how the war was going (2 Sam. 11:7).

The author chose an interesting Hebrew word in David’s questions. The verse uses *shalom* three times (“doing...doing...going”). *Shalom* means “peace,” or “wellness.” The ironic twist is that David inquires about the peace of the troops right before he sets up one of his mighty men to get killed.

David sends Uriah to his house in hopes that Uriah will be intimate with Bathsheba and thus cover-up David’s paternity. Uriah, however, did not go home, but slept the night in the guardhouse with the other servants of David.

The next day, David found out Uriah did not go home and asked Uriah why. Uriah answered, that the Ark of the Covenant was not in its Jerusalem home (it was with the Israelites at battle), nor were the other soldiers at home. It would be unseemly for Uriah to enjoy the pleasures of his house under those circumstances. (It is helpful to note that David had a policy of his soldiers staying celibate while fighting (1 Sam. 21:5).)

David was not so quick to abandon his cover-up scheme, so he instructed Uriah to stay another night. This time David brought Uriah into his presence, feeding him and plying him with drink until Uriah was intoxicated. Even intoxicated, however, Uriah had enough self-control not to return to his wife for the night. As Peter Ackroyd put it,

Uriah drunk is more pious than David sober.⁶

⁶ Ackroyd, Peter, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary, The Second Book of Samuel*, (Cambridge 1977) at 102.

The following morning, David resorted to a more drastic action. He devised the murder of Uriah. David wrote a letter to his general Joab telling him to put Uriah in the front of the hardest fighting, and then draw back so that Uriah would be killed. In a lurid twist, David sent the note back to Joab *by Uriah!*

Uriah returned to the battleground and gave the letter to Joab. Joab read the letter, and then pursued his course that was David's plan with a slight modification. Joab set Uriah to a place where there were "valiant men" and when warriors came out of the city, Uriah died in the ensuing fight.

Joab sent word back to David about the death of Uriah, adding that others had died as well. David responded to the messenger,

"Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it.'" (2 Sam. 11:25).

David then instructed the messenger to "encourage" Joab.

After Bathsheba learned her husband had died in action, she mourned for a set time and then David brought her into his house adding her as another wife. Most scholars typically assume the mourning time was seven days.⁷

Before chapter 11 ends, there is an added verse that, in the Hebrew, contrasts greatly with the verse above where David told Joab, "Do not let this matter trouble you." The word translated "trouble" is *r'ah* (pronounced rah-ah) and means evil. The word for "you" is more specifically "your eyes". More literally we could translate it, "Do not let this matter be evil in your eyes." These same words are used in contrast three verses later where it the ESV translates,

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord (2 Sam. 11:27).

This passage more literally says, "the thing David had done *was evil in the eyes of the Lord.*"

So put next to each other, we see David trying to reassure Joab that all is okay; he should not see this as evil. Yet God, who has been conspicuously absent from everything David has said or done, saw it for what it was: evil.

The story does not end there.

The Lord sends Nathan the prophet to David. Nathan does not confront David directly with his sin. Instead, Nathan tells David a story about a rich man with

⁷ Scholars base this upon passages like Gen. 50:10 where Joseph mourned the death of his father for seven days.

countless sheep who took a poor man's only sheep (family pet, actually) to feed a guest. David is real quick to see unrighteousness in the acts of others and announces,

As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die!

At that point, Nathan tells David, "You are the man!" David cannot hide from God what he did. It was not simply a secret between Joab and David. The Lord saw it and proclaimed David's sin through Nathan in excruciating detail.

The Lord then pronounces judgment:

"You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife... Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house... Behold, I will raise up evil [same word "evil" used earlier in 11:25 and 27] against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes [also same word as 11:25 and 27] and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun" (2 Sam. 12:9-12).

David sees his sin and confesses to Nathan. Nathan notes that the Lord accepted the repentance, but the earthly consequences will remain:

And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die (2 Sam. 12:14).

Very old tradition places this as the time when David composed what we now call Psalm 51. The Psalm begins,

Have mercy on me O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,⁸
so that you are blameless in your judgment (Psalm 51:1-4).

⁸ Literally "evil before your eyes." Here the same words as in 2 Sam. 11:25 and 27 are used again. David recognizes that he did indeed do evil as the Lord correctly saw, regardless of what David told Joab.

David prays that God will hide his face from David's sin and not remove the Holy Spirit from David. With a broken and contrite heart, David repented in the Psalm and before God.

In the midst of this repentance, the story finished just as Nathan noted. David did not die, but the newborn child to Bathsheba did, in spite of David's prayer for God to spare the child. Similarly, the next several chapters record how the sword affected David's house.

Among David's children, one son (Amnon) falls in love or lust with his half-sister (Tamar). Through manipulation and deceit, Amnon rapes Tamar and then sends her away in disgust. Tamar's full-brother Absalom then has Amnon murdered in revenge.

Absalom flees from David his father, finally returning and mounting a coup against David. In fear, David flees Jerusalem with a minimal army. Much of Israel withdraws their support and throws it behind Absalom. Absalom also has the counsel of Ahithophel who, assuming he is the same one mentioned earlier, is no doubt upset knowing what David did to his granddaughter Bathsheba. Ahithophel throws his wise counsel behind Absalom.

Rather than follow Ahithophel, however, Absalom chooses to follow one of David's men who is acting as a double agent. This proves Absalom's downfall and David is restored to his throne, and broken man with a broken family. In spite of David's request otherwise, Absalom is killed by Joab.⁹

This sad tale raises a huge question: How did this happen to David?

WHAT HAPPENED TO DAVID?

In his early years, David seems a totally different man than in his later years. David's rise to power is incredible. He eagerly goes into battle against gigantic odds, holy and set apart for God. He sees the spiritual battle his brothers and King Saul miss. He patiently waits for God's timing and seeks only what is right before God. He marries Michal honestly and is a good husband. He spends his days protecting Saul, even as Saul seeks to destroy him. As king, David is bothered by the idea that David sleeps in a house, while the Ark of the Covenant is in a

⁹ Another of David's sons is killed in fighting over the throne. After David dies, his son Adonijah was finally put to death after repeated attempts to take the throne from Solomon (1 Kings 1:5-53).

temporary tent. David prays, and God honors his prayers. The Israelite people flock to David in support and recognition.

Yet with the downfall molded around the Bathsheba sin we see a totally different David, spiraling down. Rather than holiness, we see David violating the tenth commandment by coveting Bathsheba (“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” Ex. 20:17). Then David violates commandment seven committing adultery (“You shall not commit adultery” Ex. 20:14). After that, David seems to have no qualm over violating commandment six having Uriah killed (“You shall not murder” Ex. 20:13).

After this, David’s rise to power is reversed. Rather than eagerly going into battle, he is hesitant, fleeing before the threatened coup of Absalom. David cannot see the spiritual battle, but with almost muddy thought is told by his generals what to do. In contrast to his honorable marriage, David sinfully adds Bathsheba to his already large collection of wives and concubines. Instead of protecting Saul, David plots to kill Uriah. Instead of being concerned over sleeping in a home while the Ark is in temporary lodgings, David sleeps quite handily while the Ark is away for battle. It is Uriah who won’t sleep at home while the Ark is away. David’s no longer effective in prayer, his prayers for his child are fruitless. David runs in fear rather than charging the giant fearlessly. David no longer attracts thousands; instead thousands quit him and throw support to Absalom.

What happened?

We see the facts of what happened, including those around the Bathsheba incident in alarming detail, but we are not told the *why*. The suggestions of scholars are as numerous as the motivators are for the sins of any man.

Some scholars see this in 20th century parlance as David’s mid-life crisis. Others see it as an incredible beauty of Bathsheba that got David’s mind racing past his self-control. Still others believe David had plenty of outlets for any hormonal impulse and see this more as an exercise in power or the thrill of the chase. One scholar terms the cause a “retirement neurosis.”¹⁰

I would suggest that David gives insight into the motivation in Psalm 51:10

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Somewhere David had lost his clean heart and was not walking by God’s Spirit. We cannot know exactly how David’s heart was sullied, but any of the suggestions above could be a part, as could most any other sin. As David recognized,

¹⁰ See the compendium of suggestions in McCarter at 288-9.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me (Ps. 51:5).

The Bathsheba story is not the cause of David's downfall; it is the story that shows his condition. As Tony Cartledge recognized,

David's battles turn inward. The focus of his energy turns from foreign and domestic matters to truly *internal* affairs, for David's greatest enemy is now himself.¹¹

Comparing David's reactions as the sin unfolded with that of Uriah just underscored the deplorable state of David's heart. David went from bad to worse while Uriah steadfastly worked to live righteously.

The entire episode is fairly rare in ancient literature. Heroes like David are rarely shown with such clear criticism. In that sense, later rabbis tried to excuse the conduct of David. Some taught that David was not really violating commandments because soldiers might have given a decree of divorce before going off to battle in case something happened to them. In other words, they thought David was within his rights to share a bed with Bathsheba. They then added that Uriah's failure to go home to Bathsheba when David instructed him to do so was treason, for refusing to follow the king's directions. The penalty for treason was appropriately death, so, the rabbis explained, David did not really commit murder.¹² Of course, these ideas show the typical mindset rather than the biblical mindset. These rabbis shared the idea of David that this was not evil in his eyes. Yet God clearly saw the evil.

CONCLUSION

Lex, Rex – the Law is King – Samuel Rutherford had a point. No king is above the law, as God gives the law. There is a moral code and a right and wrong that transcend the position of any human. It is a moral code that is rooted in the righteous character of God himself.

¹¹ Cartledge, Tony, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel (Smyth & Helwys Publishing 2001) at 495.

¹² See, *The Jewish Study Bible*, (JPS 2004) and the Midrash cited at 1860. "The various verses that accuse David of adultery and murder are thereby reinterpreted; Uriah was guilty of disobeying the king's order to go home, and was therefore worthy of death as a rebel... his [David's] relationship with Bathsheba was not adulterous because all of David's soldiers gave their wives divorces before setting out to battle."

If man attempts to trump that moral code, such an effort might wear a complicated disguise, but it is really simple rebellion. It is as old as Adam and Eve – actually older. The adversary, Satan was in rebellion to God.

No one is above God and what his direction. No rationalization is adequate, and no one is immune from temptation. Satan even took Jesus on in the wilderness, seeking to turn him from his purpose and God’s direction. Heaven help any of us who get deluded into thinking otherwise.

So what do we do with this lesson? That is in our points for home!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me”* (Ps. 51:10).

What is the status of your heart before God? Many of us go to a physician for a heart check-up. We get cholesterol checks, we weigh in, and we might even watch our diets and exercise. But how do we check our spiritual heart health?

The Lord instructed Jeremiah that the human heart “is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9), so it’s not likely the heart will tell us how it is doing! Even David needed an example of another’s sin in the parable from Nathan before he recognized his own. I suggest that the Holy Spirit is the answer here.

Take this sheet with you and pray this prayer sometime quietly before the Lord, “Father God, my desire is to have a clean heart before you. Would you examine me and tell me where my heart needs correction. What steps do I need to take to change things and more closely resemble your heart? Please show me and give me the strength and wisdom to grow and change. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

2. *“For you did it secretly”* (2 Sam. 12:12).

Let’s be real clear, whatever we say, whatever we do, God sees and God knows. What is more, he knows every thought in our minds. Even before a word is on our tongues, God knows it altogether (Ps. 139:4). There is nothing we do that he is not paying attention to. Nothing slips by him.

Now in *light* of that, how shall we live? I suggest this is more “honesty time” before God. A time of repentance, knowing that God is not fooled.

Remember that weeds are easier to pull from the ground before they bear deep roots and offshoots.

So with sin in mind, Let us pray with David, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.”

3. “*My mouth will declare your praise*” (Ps. 51:15).

David recognized that the end was not simply repentance and confession. God was moving in David to bring forth praise, and rightfully so! For as God has forgiven us, even as he guides us through earthly consequences to our sin, he does so moving us toward praise. Our eternal promise is one of purification and heavenly choirs in praise of our saving God.

Paul considered himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15-17), but the salvation of Christ moved him to praise. So let us finish our prayers with Paul: “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen.”

WANT MORE?

There are some troublesome passages concerning David and his life. Find those that trouble you and email us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com. We will plan on covering many of those in a coming lesson.