

The Role of Women in the Making of the Messianic Dynasty

The episode and David and Bathsheba (1 Sam. 11-12) marks the pivotal point of decline in the king's reign; its sequel (2 Kgs. 1-2), the accession of their Solomon to the throne, suggests a redemptive turn. Bathsheba plays a bivalent role in both the making (and breaking) of the king. In the narrative paradigm of the "female ruse" that lead up to the establishment of David's kingship (the daughters of Lot, Tamar, and Ruth), Bathsheba is unique in that she does not play the seductress; she does however ensure Solomon becomes heir to throne, and in her subtle invocation of an oath (in the name of God) affirms David's return to grace.

See Also: [*The Female Ruse: Women's Deception and Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible*](#) (Sheffield Phoenix Press 2015)

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June 2016

Four narratives of deception form the foundations of the Messianic Dynasty; all four flout laws concerned with forbidden sexual relations: Lot's daughters (Gen. 19:30-38), Tamar and Judah (Gen. 38), Ruth and Boaz (in the scroll of Ruth), and Bathsheba and David (2 Sam. 11). In this essay, I pose the question: What role do these female protagonists play in the founding of the Davidic monarchy and in directing the line of royal succession? I discuss the motif of women's deception and divine sanction expansively in my most recent book, *The Female Ruse* (Adelman 2015). In this essay, my focus is primarily upon the pivotal role Bathsheba plays in ensuring that her son, Solomon, becomes heir to the Davidic throne.

Transgression: Adultery of David and Bathsheba

The story of the David, Bathsheba and Uriah triangle opens with the king at the peak of his power, and from this vertiginous height he falls steep and hard. The decline begins in a moment of leisure, when the king remains home while his troops are deployed at the front in a siege against Rabbah. While the Ammonite city is surrounded by soldiers for months of waiting with occasional skirmishes over the wall, David penetrates the boundary one forbidden to him, summoning *her* into his palace. She is his own personal Trojan Horse; in penetrating this wall, with the breakdown of moral integrity, the man and king come tumbling down. He first sees the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on the roof when pacing the palace ramparts after a late afternoon siesta. Upon inquiring, he is told: "Isn't this Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (2 Sam. 11:3). Both these names, Eliam and Uriah, are presumably recognizable to the

king as two of his closest henchmen.¹ In committing adultery with the woman, as a daughter and a wife of men from his loyal guard, he not only violates the Law, but betrays the soldiers who fight the LORD's battles, and the kingship and the divine election that lies therein.

So David sent messengers, and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her (she was purifying herself of her impurity). And she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent to David, and she said: "I am pregnant." (2 Sam. 11.2-5, author's trans.).

Does the narrative suggest that Bathsheba is complicit in the adultery? Bible scholars in recent decades have profusely debated the role Bathsheba plays (Nicol 1997, Exum 1996, Frymer-Kensky 2002, Abisili 2011 and Koenig 2011). Does she place herself on the roof within view of the palace, in the mode of an intended seduction—as Tamar set herself up as the crossroads to waylay Judah, her father-in-law? Or is Bathsheba ostensibly raped? While the debate has been generative, it has led to a distorted binary reading of Bathsheba's role as either a conniving seductress or a hapless victim. The truth is that we are not privy to anything she feels, whether she was complicit or resistant to the summons, or whether she took pleasure in her tryst with the king. As the object of his gaze and the subject of his summons, she is granted no agency. The discrepancy in their positions of power imply that she could not have refused his missive. Furthermore, if she were conniving, either sexually desirous of David or hankering to become the mother of an heir to the monarchy, she too would have been judged guilty by the narrative. Yet she is never held culpable for the transgression. Only David is condemned, in the end, by the prophet and only he suffers the punishment meted out for *his* sins. While Bathsheba suffers consequences, first the loss of her husband,² and then the death of the child conceived by the adulterous union, she is condemned neither by society, when she later reenters the palace as David's wife, nor by the principles of divine justice. As Fokkelman points out, "the text shows her merely as an object of desire (vv. 2-4) and David's choice (v. 27)" (Fokkelman 1981:53, see also Berlin 1999:27).

The sequence of actions, however, suggests that Bathsheba is not totally without agency. The series of paratactic verbs (in the *va-yiqtol* form) alternate between man and woman, masculine and feminine subject, in the one verse accounting for their sexual union (2 Sam. 11:4): *he* sent [*va-yishlah*], *he* took *her* [*va-yiqahha*], *she* came [*va-tav'o*], *he* lay with her [*va-yishkav imah*], and *she* returned [*va-tashov*]. Against the grain of gender norms in the Bible, the woman

is the one who *comes* to the man.³ A grey area lies between the binary of active and passive subject, which disrupts the categorical reading of their intercourse as either seduction or rape. In coming into the king's private domain, she is the means of a divine trial, which, like the Trojan Horse, bodes terrible consequences for David, as a "gift" which is both bidden yet forbidden.

The scene might have concluded here as David intended—a mere fling—except for the pregnancy. Now it is her turn to send for the king. She speaks but two words in this whole chapter: "I am pregnant [*harah 'anokhi*]" (v. 5). In sending and then speaking, she echoes the discretion of Tamar, who first sends the tokens of Judah's identity before confronting him directly:

As she was being brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying: "I am pregnant [*'anokhi harah*] by the man to whom these belong." And then she said, "Please discern/recognize these, whose signet and cord and staff are these?" (Gen. 38:25)

The words – Tamar's '*anokhi harah*' and Bathsheba's '*harah 'anokhi*' – are inversely related. Tamar's pregnancy is marked by a paternity that needs proving, while Bathsheba's needs a cover. The stakes for both women are very high indeed. One woman is accused of "harlotry" and sentenced to be burned (Gen. 38.24). The other, would have been sentenced to death by stoning, if her pregnancy had become public in the husband's absence.⁴ The turning point hinges on the demand women make of men to take responsibility. In dire straits, both Tamar and Bathsheba challenge father-in-law and king. While Tamar prompts an "ethical epiphany" in Judah whereby he acknowledges his responsibility towards her and his seed (Adelman 2013), Bathsheba's announcement only embroils David further in sin as he looks to her husband for a false alibi. To his credit, the king does not deny her implied appeal. David, at least, admits to his paternity privately, and then acts to spare them both ignominy. Plan A ensues—as the king, he can cover for her pregnancy and his paternity by calling Uriah back from the front. People might then ascribe the pregnancy to the husband. That is, if Uriah concedes to sleep with his wife. But the cuckold refuses to comply!

The Murder of Uriah and the Consequences

Whether Uriah knows he has been summoned from the siege to cover for David's paternity is not clear. But the consequences for non-compliance with the king's (implicit) orders to return home to sleep with Bathsheba, his wife, are fatal. In failing to fulfill Plan A, the king

subjects Uriah to a second ruse; the husband is sent back to his demise at the battle front. After Uriah's death and the requisite mourning period, he summons Bathsheba to the palace and marries her. She then bears David the bastard son of their adulterous union as though legitimate. Crimes are made mere misdemeanors when the king presumes to stand above the Law. That is, until God intervenes. The narrator introduces the omniscient deity: "But the thing that David had done was evil in the *eyes of the LORD*" (2 Sam. 11:27).

The consequences for David are harrowing. Nathan, the prophet, intones an oracle of doom which implies two indictments (2 Sam. 12:10-12). In the first, as a consequence of Uriah's murder, punishment is meted out by the proverbial sword that will never depart from David's House. In the second, as a response to the sexual transgression, punishment will be visited upon the king with a "calamity from within his House" when another man "will lie" with his wives "in the eyes of this sun" (v. 11). What began as a transgression committed in secret, will be exposed and amplified through an act of rape, incest and treason in public, "in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight" (v. 12), when his son, Absalom, sexually possesses David's ten concubines on the very roof where the sin began (16:21-22). From this chapter onward, the king's household begins to unravel in a series of tragedies within his own family: the rape of Tamar by her half-brother, Amnon (ch. 13); she condemned as a "ruin" to live in Absalom's house (13:20); Absalom's vengeance upon his sister's rape through fratricide (13:28-33); and Absalom's insurrection, and the civil war that ensues between father and son (chs. 14-18).⁵ Gerhard von Rad suggests that the succession narrative (2 Sam. 11-1 Kgs. 2), explains the exclusion of the older brothers (Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah, who sin in the image of their father), and Solomon's accession to the throne (1965:166-205). Ineluctable justice assures that what is done in private, deemed evil in the God's eyes (2 Sam. 11:27; 12:9), will now be exposed to the public eye, measure-for-measure. As a result of the king's transgression of boundaries through power politics, crossing the line of another man's 'home' (his wife), David's own personal boundaries will be violated, in the confluence of "house" (dynasty and kingship) manifest in progeny and palace.

David has abrogated the Law, three of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not murder; Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" (Deut. 5.17-18). As Acton's dictum avers: "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." And so the History

tells us about the corruption that is endemic to the kings of Israel and Judah. In this instance, Bathsheba ‘tries’ the limits of the king’s power, not as a seductress, but as the object of his unchecked desire, a seemingly passive rather than an active player in his fall. In contrast to the daughters of Lot, Tamar, and Ruth, she does *not* initiate a ruse or seduction; she is not motivated by the desire for continuity. Rather, her pregnancy puts her (and the king) at risk by exposing their adultery. While David does acknowledge paternity, the need to cover it up ultimately leads to Uriah’s murder. So why does *this* woman, Bathsheba, of all David’s wives, become the mother of Solomon, the successor of the Judean kingship and founder of the messianic dynasty? Their first son dies as a consequence of the sin; but their second son becomes a symbol of grace, God’s exoneration. How does this happen? The mystery lies in the continuity of character, between the woman, illicitly taken by the king, and the woman who becomes Queen Mother.

The Birth of Solomon: Return to Broken Wholeness

The first sign of pardon after the condemnation of the king is articulated by the prophet. Nathan, in response to David’s confession (2 Sam. 11:13) avers that God has “put away/transferred” his sin; the father is not condemned to die but the child of the adulterous union is (v. 14). The second sign is signaled by the narrator, with the conception and birth of Solomon, who is named for peace or wholeness by both parents, and for the return to God’s grace:

Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he/she named him Solomon [*Shlomoh*]. The LORD loved him, and sent a message by the prophet Nathan; so he named him Jedidiah [*Yedidyah*] because of the LORD. (2 Sam. 12:24-25, author’s trans.)

This is the first time we have seen real tenderness between David and Bathsheba, who is now called, for the first time, “his wife”⁶ when he consoles. David *comes* to her and lies with her, an inversion of the original act of forbidden relations where she had come to him (11:4). Where he had once summoned her as an object of his own lust, now he goes to her as a subject to answer her needs, to comfort her, lie with her, and enable her to bear a son that will replace their infant who died. Compassion, comfort in the wake of mourning, is what Solomon comes to mean to her.

Once the child of this tenderness is born, both parents engage in naming him, that is, if we acknowledge the tradition preserved in the Masoretic text of the written/pronounced word (*qere/ketiv*).⁷ David and Bathsheba name him *Shlomoh* in concert with one another. The

meaning of his name might be construed as “his peace”, “his wholeness”, or “his well-being” (from *sh.l.m.*) – but is it God’s or David’s? In the aftermath of sin and rebuke, David is a broken man. The narrator interjects to tell us that “the LORD loved him,” and it is corroborated by Nathan’s naming of the child, “Jedidiah [*Yedidyah*],” literally “beloved of God.”⁸ Perhaps the name foreshadows the future status of the prince and the role that the prophet, Nathan (as agent of God), will play in determining the successor to the throne. But the name of the son serves as a counterpoint to his father’s, resonant with the lover of *Song of Songs* (*dwd*). David is beloved by many but never loves until, perhaps, this moment. God, as the “author” of this theocentric History, hints at a resolution in this second act of naming, reflecting from on high the return to wholeness below in the reconciliation between husband and wife.

Bathsheba’s Role in the Succession Narrative: Woman of Oath

In the final chapters of the succession narrative (1 Kgs. chs. 1-2), Bathsheba plays a critical role in setting up her son Solomon, “beloved of God”, as heir to the throne. Where once she had been acted upon, summoned for the fulfillment of the king’s desire, silent except for the testimony to her pregnancy, she will “show herself”, as Robert Alter avers, “a mistress of language – shrewd, energetic, politically astute” (Alter 1999:366). Her agency hinges upon the dramatic fulfillment of her name, *Bat-shevu’ah* as “woman of oath”. The first entails Nathan’s initiative to send her to the ailing and aged king in order to remind him of the promise he has supposedly made to her that their son, Solomon, would succeed him on the throne. She not only adapts Nathan’s script to include an oath made in the name of God, but prompts David to *swear* again to fulfill that oath. Though the queen plays the role of mere messenger, her adaptation of the prophet’s suggests political acumen and feminine wile on par with her biblical predecessors. Sarah and Rebekah, likewise, forward their sons as heir to the covenant and blessing, and God concurs (Gen. 21:10-12 and 27:6-7). The question of succession lies at the crux of the drama, where “natural right” is pitted against divinely sanctioned choice, as advanced by the prophet and mother.

At the end of his life, the frail and impotent David has become dangerously oblivious to the political intrigues surrounding his court. Adonijah, David’s fourth son, as the next in line to the monarchy inaugurates himself as king. So the prophet, Nathan (allied with Solomon), sends Bathsheba to the David to remind him of the promise to make Solomon the heir. The problem is

that the text never records such a promise, even at the scene of Solomon's propitious birth when one would most expect it. Is Nathan urging Bathsheba to remind the king, whose memory is fading, of a promise that simply was never recorded? Or is it a political fiction concocted to protect Bathsheba, Nathan, and the pro-Solomon faction? Or are human machinations pointing to a higher hand? Bathsheba, when she prostrates herself before the king, alters the script every so subtly, drawing on God as her alibi: "My lord, you yourself swore *by the LORD your God* to your handmaid, saying: 'Indeed, your Solomon shall reign as king after me, and he shall sit on my throne'" (v. 17). By invoking the name of God in the oath (which the prophet does not in v. 13), she allies her words and the king's promise that follows with the divine plot. Similarly, Rebekah invokes blessing in the presence of God when she urges Jacob, as an imposter, to go before his father in Esau's stead. Where the father had commanded his older son to hunt, prepare the venison, and feed him, "so that I may bless you before I die" (Gen. 27:4), Rebekah reports Isaac's words to Jacob as: "...that I may bless you *in the presence of the LORD* before I die" (v. 7). God's presence, in the blessing, was neither necessary nor anticipated by the blind, aging father. It is Rebekah who infers it. So too Bathsheba deliberately invokes God, whether David made such a promise or not, even if it was just sweet "pillow talk." Whether David had uttered an oath in the name of the LORD or not, Bathsheba brings God into the picture. Knowing her husband's idiom, she hazards the presence of the deity and wins. And David affirms this theological turn by swearing, "by the life of the LORD", to fulfill that oath to make Solomon king on that very day (vv. 29-30).

Conclusion: The Handmaid of History

The story of David and Bathsheba is really the turning point of Israelite biblical history, from the conquest of the land to the Babylonian exile through the vicissitudes of the Judean monarchy. It reinforces the notion of retributive divine justice, in the harsh judgment upon the king and the tragic events that ensue, as well as the irrevocable nature of God's covenant with David. The author (or redactor, rather) of the History would be remiss to conclude the story with David's confession and punishment for his sins. It is incomplete as the "biography" of an individual alone. The king made the city, Jerusalem, into the center of cultic worship, and laid the foundations for the House of God (the Temple). The prophet, in turn, had assured the king of Judah that he would establish a dynasty, "the House of David," in terms of an everlasting

covenant (2 Sam. 7:12-16). As Jon Levenson points out, these principles are at the center of the Deuteronomist's "Zion theology" (Levenson 1985).⁹ So the fruition of David's repentance, the boy conceived in the wake of sin and named, "Solomon [*Shlomoh*]" (by his parents) and "*Yedidiyah*" (beloved of God) by the prophet (2 Sam. 12:24), represents both the critique of corrupt rule and its restoration on a humbled footing. Bathsheba is a pivotal player at both stages. As an embodied critique of power, she is David's Nemesis, the one who speaks a somatic truth to power. Her pregnancy, her very body, exposes David in his double self, split between body and mind, between desire and moral conscience endemic to man. But Bathsheba also reminds him of his higher calling. In the succession narrative, she moves from a passive, embodied testimony against him, to a full-fledged player, when she and the prophet, Nathan, collude in guaranteeing Solomon's place upon the throne. Nathan urges her to remind David of the oath he had supposedly made to her that Solomon would be the dynastic heir. But Bathsheba deviates from script by bringing God's name into the vow (1 Kgs. 1:13, 17). Herein lies the crux of the female ruse, where the duplicity of woman aligns with the divine will. For as I have argued (Adelman 2015:126-136), the impact of an oath invoking the name of God is either vindicated or subverted by the presence or absence of God as the promised is fulfilled. Bathsheba (and the prophet) hazard on oath and triumph. The woman moves from an embodied truth to a verbal, divinely endorsed one, from carnal knowing to full consciousness in the redemptive arc of History.

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¹ Both Eliam and Uriah are identified as members of the thirty elite warriors in David’s army (2 Sam. 23.34 and 39), the former, Bathsheba’s father, is also identified as “son of Ahitophel” – Ahitophel, who later serves as Absalom’s advisor in the insurrection and civil war against his father.

² Bathsheba is not, in any way, party to the murder of Uriah. The text records that she “lamented over her husband” (2 Sam. 11.26), and only after the period of mourning was over, was she brought into the palace to become David’s wife (v. 27). One might read this as a mere formality or dissimulation on her part. However, in contrast to Abigail and her potential role in the death of her husband, Nabal (1 Sam. 25), where the text records no lament or mourning period, Bathsheba is not suspect.

³ In particular, the combination ‘he took’ [*lqh*] and ‘came into’ [*bw*] is strictly attributed to male subjects (cf. Gen. 29.23 and 38.2). There are only two examples where the female is the subject of the verb ‘to come [*bw*]’ (with possible sexual connotations): the story of Lot’s daughters (Gen. 19.34) and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11.4). In most instances, it is the man who “comes into/in [*bw*] ‘el/’al]” the tent, the home, or the woman herself (cf. Gen. 6.4, 16.2, 30.3, 38.8, 39.14; Deut. 22.13; 2 Sam. 12.24, 16.21, 20.3, BDB entry 1054, p. 99). See Alter, *David Story*, p. 251. The Septuagint, interestingly, ‘corrects’ this (or testifies to a textual variant) on 2 Sam. 11.4: “And David sent messengers, and took her, and *he* went in to her....”.

⁴ According to the norms of the Ancient Near East and the Pentateuch, the punishment for adultery (stoning to death) devolves upon both parties. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky goes to great length to show the danger Bathsheba is in,

once she discovers she is pregnant (2002:148-50). Abisili points out that, given the consequences, she would not have gone willingly to the king: “Bathsheba cannot deliberately will her own destruction. She knows the disastrous implications of marital infidelity (it includes the death penalty [Lev. 20.10; Deut. 22.22], trial by ordeal [Num 5.11-31], stripping of the adulteress naked and stoning [Hos. 2.5; Ezek. 16.37])” (Abisili 2011:7).

⁵ In response to the famous parable of “the little ewe lamb” (2 Sam. 12:1-4), David issues a verdict against the rich man who stole from the poor man: a) *that* man shall surely die (v. 5); and he shall pay fourfold for the stolen lamb (v. 6; cf. Exod. 21:37). The Talmud enumerates the four as: the child (of David and Bathsheba’s adulterous union), Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom (*b. Yoma* 22b).

⁶ In contrast to verses 11:5, 26 and 12:10, 15 where is she called “the woman” or “the wife of Uriah.”

⁷ I wish to acknowledge the double act of naming as preserved in the Masoretic text: “and he named [*va-yiqr’a*]“ what is written [*ktiv*] and she named [*va-tiqr’a*]” as it is read aloud [*qere*]. The Syriac, the Latin Vulgate, and Aramaic Targum Jonathan all follow the *qere*, “she named [him]”, while the Greek Septuagint follows the tradition of the written form (*ktiv*): “and he named.”

⁸ Alter understands “Jedidiah” to mean “God’s friend”, and reads it in accordance with the phrase that follows “by the grace of [*ba’avur*] the LORD”. Though the term “*ba’avur*” may suggest a reason or cause, Alter understands it as purpose – “for the sake of”, and reads a political motive behind the name: “Perhaps, the second name, indicating special access to divine favor, reflects a political calculation on the part of Nathan: he is already aligning himself with Solomon (and with Bathsheba), figuring that in the long run it will be best to have a successor to David under some obligation to him. In the event Nathan’s intervention will prove crucial in securing the throne for Solomon” (Alter 1999:262). This reading, however, ignores the narrative voice and its theological directive, which explicitly states that “God loved him” and that God sent the prophet to name him Jedidiah.

⁹ Levenson demonstrates how Jerusalem was inextricably associated with King David, from the tenth century through the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile (587 BCE): “the fortunes of Jerusalem and of the house of David were to rise and to fall together (Levenson 1985:97). The return to Jerusalem and the reestablishment of the Davidic line was guaranteed by the covenant in 2 Samuel 7, and reiterated throughout 1-2 Kings (cf. 1 Kgs. 8:20, 25; 9:5; 11:5, 13, 32, 36; 15:4; 2 Kgs. 2:4; 8:19; 19:34; 20:6).