



The Case against David 2 Samuel 11-12

Introduction

The story of David and Bathsheba represents one of the familiar yet dark narratives of the Bible. Often the story serves as a strong warning to married couples. But while the reprehensible nature of adultery remains, this account goes beyond to focus a penetrating light on David's abuse of power.

A Pivotal Act

The night that David slept with Bathsheba changed everything. That event serves as the critical turning point in David's story. Up to this point, David had almost all wins. He righteously lamented over fallen Saul (2 Sam 1); his house grew stronger over his rival's weakening house (3:1); all the tribes of Israel affirmed him as king (5:1-5); he reveled in bringing the ark to Jerusalem (6:14); God delivered an eternal promise to David's household (7); and he compiled an impressive string of military victories (5:17-25; 8:1-14; 10:1-19). David enjoyed a winning streak of unprecedented proportions. Then that fateful evening came.

After that night, David's infant son died (12:19); his son Amnon raped David's daughter Tamar (13:1-21); his son Absalom killed David's son Amnon for raping David's daughter (13:22-29); Absalom is killed attempting to steal the throne (15-19); and Sheba also tries to take David's throne (20). Before that night David knew only winning; after that night, only losing.

An Abuse of Power

A surface reading of 2 Samuel 11 might lead one to conclude that David and Bathsheba committed adultery and together faced God's judgment. In fact, some have suggested that Bathsheba deliberately charmed the King into sin.¹ But the narrator uses several techniques to paint a more sympathetic portrait of Bathsheba and a more sinister picture of King David.

The architecture of the ancient city of David helps explain how David could so easily see Bathsheba bathing. Archaeologist Nadav Na'aman's reconstruction of David's Jerusalem shows that David's palace stood at the pinnacle of the city. It commanded a view of all the houses that cascaded down the hillside below it.² Those houses had flat roofs where many domestic tasks were done, including bathing. Rather than having indoor bathrooms, Israelites had basins outside for washing and bathing. So archaeology tells us that Bathsheba bathed where everyone bathed. The text tells us that Bathsheba bathed in obedience to the Law (2 Sam 11:4; cf. Lev 15:19-33).

Convincing Clues in the Story

Throughout the narrative, the author points many fingers at David. He subtly condemns David as the scene opens. In the ancient Near East, kings led their armies into battle (1 Sam 8:19; 11:1). Even Saul was on the scene when Goliath roared (1 Sam 17). King David was known as a warrior (1 Sam 18:7, 13-16). Yet the author notes that "at the time kings go out, David sent Joab" and "David was remaining in Jerusalem" (1 Sam 11:1).

The story heightens David's guilt through the servant's report. When David inquired about Bathsheba, the servant responded by saying that she was the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah (2 Sam 11:3). Both Eliam and Uriah were part of David's mighty men, his most loyal and honored warriors (2 Sam 23:34, 39). In fact, Uriah refused to sleep in his own bed while others faced combat. David not only was sinning against God, he was shattering the trust of men who risked their lives for him.

The words chosen to describe David's actions also point to his responsibility: "David saw...David sent...David took...David slept with her" summarizes the deed (2 Sam 11:2-4). Each verb highlights David's intentional actions to bring Bathsheba to his bed. Later, the language of Nathan's rebuke picks up this emphasis. Nathan describes David as the domineering baron who "took" the beloved ewe of the poor, paralleling how David "took" Uriah's wife (2 Sam 12:4, 9). Throughout this scene, David's calculated sin is highlighted.

Following the transgression, David's cover-up further reveals his blame. David again employed his royal power to retrieve Uriah from the battlefield (11:6). But Uriah foils the Israelite king's scheme. Uriah was too loyal. Even when made drunk by the king, Uriah refused to dishonor his

¹ See Eugene Merrill, "2 Samuel," *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, page 467.

² See "The Interchange between the Bible and Archaeology," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jan/Feb 2014, page 59.

armor by sleeping in his own home (11:9-13). The noble actions of this Gentile Hittite soldier served as a stunning witness against the shameful actions of the king of Israel. Even after Uriah's murder, King David, who had mourned so deeply for his rival Saul (2 Sam 1), brushes off the death of his loyal warrior with "now one then another the sword will devour" (2 Sam 11:25).

The Verdict

Each of the many clues serve as supporting documentation for the Lord's judgment on the case: "the thing which David had done was evil in the eyes of Yahweh" (11:27).