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# Bathsheba: From Rape Victim to Queen Mother

(2 Samuel 11–12; 1 Kings 1–2)

There were no corridors of power in Eden. God had no palace there, and the woman, though the victim of a snake's duplicity, did not have to deal with any dark bureaucracies. Sarah twice found herself in a king's harem, but the tent was her usual domain, and it was not great and powerful men who made for her tragedy, but a rival wife, two children, a husband whose carelessness of her sometimes beggared our belief, and a God who did not communicate with her and kept her on the margins of his promises. Hagar seemed for a short time like a princess, alone in a desert with her God, but her normal realm, like Sarah's, was small and domestic, until in the vastness of the wilderness she discovered how to live away from men of power altogether. With Shiphrah and Puah, however, we encountered two women who were at ease in a throne room, and knew, indeed, how to make a fool of a king. And in the next chapter of Exodus we met with a woman who did not visit with the honours heaped upon her by God, invited comparison with one; the pharaoh's daughter *was* one. With Hannah we moved away from monarchs and their courts, though we still found her having to deal with Eli, high priest of Shiloh and judge of Israel, and finally heard her singing a king's song at the top of her none too delicate voice.

Bathsheba takes us into the innermost recesses of a king's palace, and keeps us there. In her company we will witness events of shocking brutality. We will see a king committing sexual acts of a kind that would, if they were contemporary, keep the British

tabloid press going for weeks. We will see that same king arranging the murder of one of the troops closest to him. We will see rape, unthinking exploitation of women, palace intrigue, and in the end two kings getting rid of those who get in their way. All that we hear about will belong to that great history the Israelites told of themselves, that story that stretches from creation to Babylon and takes in the books from Genesis to Kings. More remarkably still, all of it will belong to the stories of the two most renowned kings Israel ever had, David and Solomon. Its candour will be astonishing, and, if we have absorbed the propaganda about those kings that is offered in later sections of the Bible and in our traditions, hard to come to terms with.

For a few verses of Exodus 1 we found ourselves handling what was possibly, perhaps probably, a woman's story. In 1 Samuel 1–2 we noted the extent to which the story was told from Hannah's point of view, and how it came to be dominated by her actions and her speech. Bathsheba, however, is quite another matter. She has six scenes, and appears briefly at the end of two more, but all of them have chiefly to do with men, either with David and her husband Uriah, or the prophet Nathan, or David's son Adonijah, or the son born to her and David, Solomon. What is more, it is very difficult for us to be sure in those passages what kind of woman we are dealing with.

Solomon does not show us his character until the end of Bathsheba's last scene, but then it, or part of it at least, is plain for us all to see. Uriah, Adonijah, and Nathan are lively figures from the start. As for David, his is one of the most striking portraits of a king to have come down to us from the ancient world. But we will find it hard to know what to make of Bathsheba. In her first scene in particular she will remain so far back in the shadows of the narrative that at first it will be hard to make her out at all. We will have to reserve our judgement upon her part in that passage until we reach Nathan's parable in 2 Samuel 12. Then we will become certain, or as certain as we can be, about how the narrator sees her. In her other five main scenes in the first two chapters of 1 Kings, she will step much further out into the open, and will have a good deal to say, but even then she will remain an ambiguous figure, and we will have to search the words and shapes of the narrative very carefully to achieve any clarity. It will be fascinating work, or should be, for we will be studying some of the most sophisticated and carefully crafted narratives in all Scripture.

## David's rise to power

(1 Sam. 16 – 2 Sam. 10)

Before the narrator sets the scene for Bathsheba's first entrance, we must briefly set the scene for David. Bathsheba does not appear until 2 Samuel 11.2. That is a very long way into the story of David. He is anointed king by Samuel back in 1 Samuel 16, and has his first triumph in 1 Samuel 17, when the Philistine giant, Goliath, comes crashing down to his sling-stone. Samuel's anointing of him is an act of treachery, for Saul is occupying Israel's throne at the time. It represents a *coup d'état*. Such things are usually resolved one way or another with considerable swiftness. Rival armies are raised, palaces are stormed, and amid great slaughter either the pretender comes to power, or the established king remains to continue his reign and mop up the insurgents. Certainly things cannot be left as they are. For Israel has two men anointed king, and that is one too many.

At first David's rise to power is astonishingly rapid. Though his anointing is done on the quiet at Bethlehem, with no great celebrations, his slaughter of Goliath leads immediately to Saul taking him on as a member of his palace staff, and to the king's son, Jonathan, becoming his close friend. It also turns him overnight into a popular hero. Jealous of that popularity, Saul takes what we might think the fatal step of appointing him a commander in his army, where he achieves instant and repeated success and widespread acclaim. Thus Saul, who knows nothing of the episode at Bethlehem, has brought him to the centre of his power amid cheering crowds, has enabled him to gain support in his own family, and has put troops in his hand. And all by half-way through 1 Samuel 18. By the end of that chapter he has also given him the hand in marriage of his daughter, Michal. For David, all is going to plan, and, most important of all, the plan is God's. We are assured several times by the narrator that David is God's man, and that Saul is rejected. We have known since his secret anointing that David will come to power. Since that moment it has been just a question of time. When we reach the end of 1 Samuel 18, we are surely convinced that that time will come in the very next chapter.

In truth David does not occupy Saul's throne until another fourteen chapters have finished their course. He spends that time on the run, as a bandit, a runner of a protection racket, and as a mercenary in the service of one of the kings of Israel's enemies, the Philistines. It is not an edifying tale, nor is it meant to be. He

is not presented as a fine moral figure. He is presented as a noboc – even his own father does not think of presenting him to Samuel as a possible candidate for anointing in 1 Samuel 16 – who comes from nowhere to challenge, humiliate, and ultimately to defeat the establishment. He is presented as God's man who cannot put a foot wrong, caught up in a struggle for power with a king who was once God's man, but who now cannot put a foot right.<sup>1</sup> As Walter Brueggemann has so powerfully suggested,<sup>2</sup> this part of David's story is one designed for those who find themselves on the margin who long for God to take their side, who wait for a hero to emerge who will lead them in their struggle, and who are not going to be over-critical of him when he does.

By the time Bathsheba comes on the scene, however, the story has changed radically. Saul is dead, killed in battle with the Philistines. David has been anointed again, this time in public, this time not as God's secret pretender to the throne, but as the acclaimed occupier of it, at least in the territory of Judah. One of Saul's sons, Ishbaal, has reigned for a time over the rest of his father's land, but he too is dead, together with the other members of Saul's family who might have posed a threat to David's sovereignty. Only Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, remains, but he, as the narrator is careful to tell us, is a cripple. By the time Bathsheba appears, David has finally achieved his destined place as the ruler of all Israel; he has shrewdly moved his capital from Hebron, where he was first anointed as king of Judah, to Jerusalem; he has seen off the Philistines, who have so dogged the fortunes of the Israelites since early in their time in the promised land; most important of all, he has received through the prophetic Nathan a divine assurance that he will found a dynasty in Israel that will last for ever. He is no longer the one who challenges the establishment. He is the establishment.

In the chapter immediately preceding Bathsheba's first scene, he reaches the position where he does not need always to fight his own battles any more. He can send his general Joab to fight the Ammonites and their mercenaries for him. Yet his own strength as a soldier and leader of troops has not declined. Faced by a renewed threat from the Aramean kingdoms, he again leads the Israelites into battle, and again inflicts a crushing defeat upon their enemy. Thus when Bathsheba appears he is at the very height of his powers. She, through no power of her own, except her ability to conceive, will change all that, and begin his sad, long and most troubled decline.

### Scene 1: A victim in the shadows

(2 Sam. 11.1-5)

Bathsheba's first scene is short and remarkably unadorned and sparse in its presentation. We have noticed already the use of understatement by the storytellers of the Old Testament, their technique of using a few plain words to describe momentous events, their willingness to give us mere skeletons of speech and leave our imaginations to clothe them with flesh. The first five verses of 2 Samuel 11 provide one of the most striking examples of their art in the entire Hebrew Bible.

Now in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his bed and went for a stroll on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing. Now the woman was very beautiful to look at. He sent and enquired after the woman, and said,<sup>3</sup> 'Isn't this Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' So David sent messengers and he took her, and she came to him and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. And the woman conceived and sent and informed David. She said, 'I am pregnant.' (2 Sam 11.1-5)

At no point does the narrator tell us what to think. Judgement will be passed at the very end of the chapter, and that will be followed by Nathan's famous parable that will shed much light on the passage. However, some of the ambiguities will never be resolved. That, of course, is not a weakness of the writing. Quite the reverse. One of the reasons why this passage and those that immediately follow it are so powerful is that they arouse our imaginations so quickly and then tease them and play with them so adroitly. Those who wish to control texts like these, and arrive at a clear, definitive reading will be disappointed. Those who wish instead to enjoy them, and to allow themselves to be led a merry, or in this case a most sombre, dance, will discover the delight and the terror they have to offer.

The first question the passage poses is how we are to interpret David's staying behind in Jerusalem. As we have already mentioned,

he has sent Joab to do his fighting for him before now (10.7). We suggested then that his doing so was a measure of his power and security on the throne. Later, in a passage that looks back to his wars with the Philistines, his men will charge him not to lead them into battle any more. 'You must not put out the lamp of Israel,' they will say (21.17); he is their light, their hope, and he must not put his own safety at risk. Yet, back in 1 Samuel 18.16, when Saul first put him in charge of troops, we saw the risks a king might take when he stayed at home: 'All Israel and Judah loved David; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them.' David has, as yet, no pretender to his throne, but still that verse from near the beginning of his story makes us uneasy. It is after all, as the passage reminds us, the season when kings go to war,<sup>4</sup> and this particular king is staying behind.

We may not be entirely clear how to judge David's staying in Jerusalem, but we can be more certain about the impact of his doing so on the story. Joab, the officers closest to David, and 'all Israel' (in time of war 'all Israel' means the soldiers fighting in the army; that women and children also belonged to Israel is not recognized in such a context) are some forty miles away at Rabbah (on the site of the modern Amman). David is not, of course, entirely on his own. He has servants about him to care for his needs, and run his errands for him, as Bathsheba's scene itself acknowledges, and as the subsequent passage will make even clearer. Yet they remain shadowy, anonymous figures. He has, too, his harem, his wives and his concubines, though they are not even mentioned; it is as if they are not there. They do not come to his mind when, as seems to be the case, he is overcome with sexual desire. They are cast aside by this narrative, and no one pays them the slightest heed. We only know of their presence from other passages, such as 1 Samuel 18.27; 25.42-3; 2 Samuel 3.2-5; 12.8; 16.21-2. David may not be on his own, but he *seems* to be on his own, with no one in the palace to occupy him and nothing to do but go for a stroll after a siesta. While the mice are away, this particular cat will play.

Just as the details of the narrative convey a sense of David's isolation, so they suggest Bathsheba's vulnerability, once she is inside the palace. Who is there who might protect her from the designs of the king? We are made to feel there is no one. In fact, her vulnerability emerges from the text before she gets there. The king can see her bathing. He is in a position to invade her privacy. Her nakedness is exposed. Unknowingly, even before she is summoned to the king's presence, she is thus humiliated and put to shame. The palace roof puts him above her (archaeology

confirms that, but the passage itself will later talk repeatedly of 'going down' to where Bathsheba lived; 11.8, 9, 11, 13). As J. P. Fokkelman remarks, the story here puts him 'in the position of a despot who is able to survey and choose as he pleases'.<sup>5</sup>

All David sees is Bathsheba's body, and all he recognizes is its beauty. Her beauty proves to be her downfall, just as it was so nearly Sarah's in both Egypt and Gerar (see Gen. 12. 10ff.; 20). The narrator does not tell us in so many words of David's lust. He does not need to. It is enough that all he speaks of, beyond the details of Bathsheba's father and husband, is her physical form. It is enough that that is sufficient to spur David into action, and to drive him to immediate sexual intercourse with her, despite his knowing he is committing adultery with the wife of one of his own officers. It is enough that David wants nothing from her but the pleasure of her body.

Unless, of course, Bathsheba means to invite his attention, and becomes not his victim but his co-conspirator. Alice Laffey would condemn such a suggestion as 'male chauvinist',<sup>6</sup> and we are fully aware that it risks such quick condemnation. But it needs examining for a number of reasons: first, we cannot presume that the text portrays Bathsheba in a way that we ourselves find congenial – it *may* contain what we would call 'male chauvinism', and if it does, we must not be shy of saying so; second, as we have made quite clear already, it is particularly difficult to see Bathsheba's character here, drawn as she is with so few lines – any interpretation which claims to be supported by the text, and this one does, must therefore be taken seriously; and third, our suggestion is far from original, but has been made by several commentators and on occasion has been argued at great length.

Some commentators assume Bathsheba was bathing on the roof of her house.<sup>7</sup> If we imagine she was, then it is possible for us to suppose that she was being deliberately provocative in exposing herself in a place that she knew was overlooked by the palace. So H. W. Hertzberg speaks of a possible element of 'feminine flirtation'.<sup>8</sup> With much greater care and at much greater length, Randall Bailey argues that Bathsheba is 'a prime mover', 'a willing and equal partner to the events which transpire', and that she and David strike a deal, whereby he gains close ties with an important aristocratic family, and she marries into the palace to be assured that the son born to her and the king will succeed to the throne.<sup>9</sup> Thus, claims Bailey, 'the David-Bathsheba narrative is better read as a tale of political deal-making and intrigue than one of mere lust having run awry'.<sup>10</sup>

Bailey supports his reading by noting a number of features in the text. When Bathsheba is introduced to us, her father's name is mentioned, and before the note about her marital status – that Bailey says, suggests that David is primarily interested in political connections and in contracting a political alliance. David's actions are neatly paralleled by Bathsheba's – in verse 3 David 'sends', 'enquires', 'says', while in verse 5 Bathsheba 'sends', 'informs', 'says'. In the crucial verse 4, the place where sexual intercourse takes place between them, David 'sends', 'takes', 'goes with', while Bathsheba 'comes', 'has been purifying herself', 'returns'. Those balances in the use of the verbs, Bailey argues, indicate that Bathsheba is as much in control of the action as David is, that she is an 'equal partner to the events which transpire'.<sup>11</sup> Places particular emphasis on her 'coming' to the palace, and her 'sending' to inform David of her having conceived. 'comes', she is not brought, and in 'sending' a messenger earlier in the action, and joins 'a highly select number of powerful and/or devious women' who are represented as the subject of a particular verb in the books from Joshua to Kings.<sup>12</sup>

To those not familiar with the intricacies of Old Testament scholarship such arguments might seem forced and pernicious. I have already discovered in our earlier chapters that whether a character in a biblical story is the subject or object of the verbs that are used can be very significant when it comes to assessing their portrayal in the narrative. We have also seen that we can learn much from the use of particular verbs that are echoed in other passages. Furthermore, it can be shown over and over again that the storytellers of the Old Testament delighted in creating the kind of patterns and balances in their writing that Bailey detects in verses 3 and 5 and within verse 4, and that such things are important for our appreciation not only of their artistry, but of the meanings they are attempting to convey. There is nothing wrong with the kind of arguments that Bailey produces. We need, however, to discover whether his conclusions stand up to close scrutiny. Our whole understanding of Bathsheba in this scene may be affected by our decision.

First, let us go back to the idea that Bathsheba was bathing on the flat roof of her house, a notion that Bailey himself does not employ. We need here to avoid assumptions, particularly ones that might stem from the so pervasive stereotype of the wicked and dangerous temptress. We readily saw the necessity to cast as that particular stereotype when we were considering the portrait

of the woman in the Garden of Eden. We must beware of it here also.

We must be quite clear that the storyteller does not tell us where Bathsheba was bathing. All we know is that David, with the advantage of the height of his palace roof, could see her. We do not know she was on her own roof. She may have been in a courtyard, or David may even have been able to see her through a window. We cannot tell. If we wish to know whether she was being deliberately provocative or flirtatious, we cannot do so yet, but must look for clues in the rest of the scene.

We might think that the balance of verbs between verses 3 and 5 and within verse 4 provide them. In truth, however, the balance is more artificial than real, more a question of outward form than inner meaning. For see what verbs are balanced with what! Within the dramatic verse 4, the verse on which the whole scene turns, David does the sending, the taking, the 'love'-making, Bathsheba does the coming and going, and, in a parenthesis, the ritual purifying. David's verbs speak his power, and tell, surely, of his abuse of that and of Bathsheba herself. There is a terrible abruptness and stark quality to his actions. There is no time for speech or conversation, no time for care, and certainly none for love, no time even for the kind of courtly etiquette that we will hear of in some of Bathsheba's scenes in 1 Kings. In particular, David is the subject of the two verbs at the centre of it all, the verbs that matter more than any of the others. He 'takes her'; he 'lies with her'. *He* takes *her*. *He* lies with *her*. That is how the storyteller puts it. In doing so he tells us all we need to know.

Bathsheba's verbs in verse 4, by way of contrast, merely describe the setting for those actions of David, and their immediate prelude and aftermath. The reference to her purifying herself after her period does a number of things: it tells us that when she conceives David must be the father, and there can be no question of Uriah having fathered the child before he went off on campaign; it suggests it is possible for her to conceive, and so emphasizes the dangers for her of any illicit sexual union, and underscores that vulnerability of hers that we have already commented upon; it speaks of her purity, her cleanness, and, in this sordid context subtly suggests that that goes more than skin deep;<sup>12</sup> it signals her piety and thus ties her more closely to her husband, Uriah, who in the subsequent passage will show a dogged determination to obey the terms of God's torah in the face of a king who rides roughshod all over them. As for Bathsheba's coming and going, they hardly speak of her power, for what else can she do?

Summoned by the king, she must obey. Whether she has a notion of his purpose, we are not told. After he has abused her, she can do is go home. If there is a terrible abruptness a starkness to David's actions, then there is an equally terrible part and loneliness to Bathsheba's.

The initiatives she takes in verse 5, which so clearly ape the taken by David in verse 3, also need not be interpreted in the way Bailey does. Indeed, given what we have just said about verse they demand to be understood in other ways. It is here, in this verse, that the narrator most clearly allows Bathsheba some dignity of her own, and puts some power in her hands. Whether she refuses to go to the palace herself out of fear or disgust, again we cannot know. But she is now playing the king's game. She is doing what David did. She is sending him a message. She is answering his show of power with hers. He asserted his power over her raping her. She asserts her power over him by conveying to him the words 'I am pregnant'. They are few enough in the English. In the original Hebrew they are even fewer. There are only two them, and their impact could hardly be more dramatic. To David they are devastating. He will never be the same again. On the plot of his whole story, from 1 Samuel 16 to 1 Kings 2, turn. They are not the triumphant cry of a woman who knows she bears the probable heir to the throne. They are the plain speaking of a woman who has been raped and discarded, and who wishes more courageously to make clear to her rapist the consequences of his actions. The mention of her father at her initial introduction is certainly interesting. It is almost certainly an indication that she comes from an influential and aristocratic family.<sup>13</sup> As Bailey has reminded us,<sup>14</sup> there are other stories of David being attracted to women of high social status (see 1 Sam. 18.20-9; 25.1-42). Nevertheless, it tells us nothing about the part she plays in the affair, and it cannot count against the suggestions in the rest of the passage of lust and rape. Indeed, for an audience belonging to a hierarchical society, such as prevailed in ancient Israel from the time of the monarchy onward it could only serve to emphasize the enormity of David's crime.

### Murder, disgrace, and a touch of defiance

(2 Sam. 11.6-27a)

Yet, despite all we have said and argued, some doubt must still remain in our minds. The telling of that scene is so very economic:

So little lies on its surface, that we cannot help wondering whether we have not dug up what we wanted or expected to find. Fortunately the narrator comes to our aid. He tells a parable, or rather he has the prophet Nathan tell one, and in its lines he provides not just Nathan's but his own comment on what has transpired.

He does not tell it immediately, however. First he relates the story of David's murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. He does it all with exceptional brilliance, but to us, interested as we are first and foremost in Bathsheba, the results are unnerving. For he takes much longer over Uriah's murder than he did over Bathsheba's rape, twenty verses instead of five (11.6-25). His account of it is full of life and colour. There is dialogue between Uriah and David, between David and Joab, and between David and Joab's messenger. Uriah may only have one speech to make, but it is a fine one and serves to put David to shame. Though we are left not knowing enough about Uriah, though we are uncertain at the end of it all whether he has ever suspected anything of what the king has been doing to him or has done to his wife, nevertheless he emerges as a well-rounded figure, who readily commands our sympathy. Indeed, since the narrator tells us he is of Hittite blood, he clearly belongs to that select band of foreigners we referred to in chapter 4<sup>15</sup> who are conspicuous in their obedience towards the God of Israel, and who so often show up the disobedience of one or more of the Israelites who surround them in their narratives. He belongs to the company of Shiphrah and Puah, if they were Egyptians, of the daughter of the pharaoh and her attendants in Exodus 2, of Jethro, Balaam, Rahab, Ruth, Jael, Naaman, and the Syrophenician woman and the two centurions in the Gospels. In short, Uriah is a hero. The narrator has not yet told us enough about Bathsheba for us even to have the option of thinking her a heroine.

All this might well lead us to suppose not only that the narrator is much more interested in Uriah than he is in Bathsheba, but also that he takes his murder much more seriously than her rape. Such impressions are only reinforced by the way he closes the scene in 11:26-7a: 'When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentations for her lord. When the period of mourning was over, David sent and gathered her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.' We are back to the bald speech with which the chapter began. Bathsheba has not been mentioned during all David's intricate manoeuvring to get Uriah saddled with the paternity of the child in her womb, and to see him killed. Throughout that section the scene has been set either in the palace, or at the siege of Rabbah. At no point has it shifted

to Bathsheba and Uriah's house, and allowed Bathsheba to appear on stage. Only now that it is all over does it do so, and enable us to hear her grief. We do not know whether she heard of Uriah's coming to Jerusalem, of David's attempts to get him to go home and sleep with her, of her husband's return to Rabbah, or the contents of the letter he took with him from the king that sealed his fate. Whether she ever learns the truth, we do not know. Uncomfortably, we recall Sarah's tragic exclusion from the story of Abraham's binding of Isaac.

At least Bathsheba does reappear in this narrative. At least she does get to hear of her husband's death and is permitted some grief. After the episode in the land of Moriah, we will remember, the narrator of Genesis only mentioned Sarah to tell us the length of her life, the place of her death, and the comic attempts of Abraham to purchase a place for her burial.

Moreover, sparse though the writing is, here in 2 Samuel the narrator adds more, much more, to Bathsheba's pain (or, if we agree with Bailey, to her delight), and with a single touch of the utmost subtlety suggests a toughness in her we have not seen before.

First, he makes it sufficiently clear that she does not hear about Uriah from David himself. The king does not attempt to redeem himself by paying her that courtesy. Either he sends a messenger again, or else the news is passed on to her by someone hidden entirely from our sight.

Second, the narrator describes how this man who once raped her, the man who has murdered her husband, now sends for her a second time, harvests her (the verb employed here is normally used of gathering in a harvest or mustering an army<sup>16</sup>), and makes her his wife and puts her in his bed once more. If we still think that Bailey's reading of her first scene is correct, then this is a moment of triumph for Bathsheba, the moment she and David have been working towards. If we think him wrong, then we must find this the most terrible climax of her humiliation, and of the king's ruthlessness and brutality.

Yet still the narrator tells us so little. Yet still, perhaps, he tells us enough. Of David, he informs us that he 'gathers' Bathsheba in as soon as the formalities of mourning are done. The king, it seems, has no regrets, shares no grief. All he wants is Bathsheba in his bed, and being king, he gets what he wants. Bathsheba herself, however, grieves for 'her lord'. The wording the narrator has chosen is significant. He uses a strong verb to express her wailing and lamentation, much more heavily freighted with emotion than

the one he uses in the next verse of the rites of mourning.<sup>17</sup> And he has Bathsheba crying for 'her lord'. We may not like it that she so clearly expresses her subservience to Uriah, but in its context the term has a distinct defiance about it, and gives us a hint of the strength she will show at the beginning of the books of Kings. For if Uriah is her 'lord', then David is not. The king may take her with most cruel haste into his harem, but she is not his, not yet at least. The narrator, who thus does her more justice than immediately meets our eye, also persists in calling her 'the wife of Uriah' in the next scene with Nathan (see 12.9–10), and at the start of the one after that, when the child conceived in the rape dies (see 12.15). Not until David comes to console her for the loss of her child will she be called 'David's wife' (12.24).

### The parable

#### (2 Sam. 11.27b–12.7a)

Now we have reached, or very nearly reached, the parable which, in our view, will settle the matter of the nature of Bathsheba's involvement in the events of chapter 11. There are just two half-verses before it begins. 'But the thing which David had done was wrong in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sent Nathan to David' (11.27b–12.1a). Bathsheba's 'I am pregnant' fell like a stone into what for David had been the calm waters of his success. Now the narrator chucks in a rock. Uriah spoke of the sacred ark in his speech to David in 11.11, but otherwise there has been no mention of God in the whole episode. Now there is. It is made with the extreme brevity we have become familiar with, but its impact is all the more powerful for that. David has behaved as if he is above the law, and not subject to the demands of God. He has behaved as though he has absolute mastery over events and over those around him. With the seven words of the Hebrew of 11.27b the narrator reminds us that he is wrong, and 'sends' Nathan (more sending) to remind him.

What it is that has so displeased God is not yet plain. Is it the rape of Bathsheba, or the murder of Uriah, or both? The parable will tell us. One thing, however, does seem clear already, though its significance will again need the light of the parable upon it. David is here condemned by God, but Bathsheba is not. The most natural way to interpret that is to suppose that Bathsheba has indeed been the innocent party all along, and David's victim, not

his co-conspirator. Yet we have already had cause to observe how indistinct for the most part are the lines of communication between God and women in the Old Testament, and how he is usually represented as dealing only with men. Is that sufficient to explain the one-sidedness of his condemnation here? Does only the man, who is after all his chosen king, count as far as God is concerned? Does he simply ignore Bathsheba and her part in the affair? We shall see.

[Nathan] came to David, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and his children; it used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his bosom. It was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, but he spared taking an animal from his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him. Instead he took the poor man's ewe lamb, and prepared that for the man who had come to him.' (12.1b–4)

Nathan the prophet does not put his speech in the form of an oracle or solemn pronouncement from God. Very soon he will deliver two such oracles, and twice the words 'Thus says the Lord' will go ringing round the palace. For now he plays the trickster, and pretends to present a legal case to David and invite his judgement. The king falls into the trap, and in passing judgement on 'the rich man' passes judgement on himself. The beginning of Nathan's response provides one of the most dramatic moments in Scripture.

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die! He shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no compassion!' Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!' (12.5–7a)

Some have complained that Nathan's parable does not fit chapter 11 closely enough.<sup>18</sup> It is quite true that it does not appear to reflect on the bulk of it. It does not comment on the murder of Uriah, for example. Yet, as David Gunn has remarked, 'it is absolutely plain that it encapsulates the essence of David's dealing with Bathsheba'.<sup>19</sup>

Its focus comes as a surprise. The balance of chapter 11, which,

as we have remarked, devotes so much more space and colour to Uriah's murder, would lead us to expect the parable to concentrate on that. Instead it neglects it entirely. The 'little ewe lamb' is so much at the centre of Nathan's story that one commentator prefers to call the piece a fable rather than a parable,<sup>20</sup> and the lamb is, of course, Bathsheba. It seems that the attention of the God of this narrative is focused exclusively on the rape and on David taking her away from Uriah into his already well-stocked (if that description can be forgiven) harem. That is what has aroused his anger and driven him to come out of the shadows of the narrative and send a prophet. Uriah, the figure behind the 'poor man', appears not as the murdered soldier, but as the husband robbed of his wife.

We said 'of course' the lamb was Bathsheba. We do not have to make any presumptions. Nor is our judgement based merely on the general shape of the parable, or on the way in which its plot so obviously takes us through what she has suffered. Some of the details of the writing quite plainly confirm it. The clues are given in verse 3, in the ways in which the poor man's lamb is described.

The lamb is clearly not regarded as a mere item of livestock by the man. She<sup>21</sup> is even more to him than a pet. As George Coats has pointed out, the reference to her growing up with him 'carries such personal, human connotations'.<sup>22</sup> The Hebrew verb employed is the same, for example, as that used of the growing up of Isaac in Genesis 21.8, or that of Ishmael in Genesis 21.20, or Moses in Exodus 2.10-11. The phrase 'lying in his bosom' also occurs in another Old Testament passage of a small child sleeping with its mother (see 1 Kings 3.20<sup>23</sup>). As Nathan himself explains, the lamb was 'like a daughter' to the man.

Or does he really mean 'like a wife'? The Hebrew word for daughter is 'bath'. Is there the beginnings of a play on words here? Are we meant to catch an echo of Bathsheba's name? It would seem so, for, not surprisingly, 'lying in someone's bosom' is also used in the Old Testament to describe sexual relations. We will meet the phrase in that sense just five verses later, in 12.8, and again in 1 Kings 1.2. It also occurs with sexual connotations in Micah 7.5. Nathan could hardly have said the lamb was like a wife to the man, because then he would have ruined his story by giving it overtones of bestiality! Yet surely he is referring to the marriage bed of Bathsheba and Uriah. If we suspect he is, then our suspicions are confirmed by his talk of the lamb eating the man's food and drinking from his cup. For as David Gunn points out, such language is often used in the Old Testament in sexual imagery.<sup>24</sup> The love poetry of the Song of Songs has plenty of talk of eating

and drinking that is heavy with sexual innuendo (see, for example, Song of Sol. 2.3-5; 4.10-5.1; 7.8-9).

The parable, then, is primarily about Bathsheba, and about David's taking her away from Uriah when he had plenty of wives and concubines to satisfy his passion. It does, admittedly, still reflect male values. It tends to make us feel more sorry for 'the poor man', Uriah, than for his 'lamb', Bathsheba. It provides echoes, the only ones we have, of Uriah's love for Bathsheba, but cannot, because of the image of the lamb, speak adequately of any love of Bathsheba for Uriah. Nevertheless, Uriah's devotion to her and passion for her is carefully and movingly suggested, in a way that allows us to appreciate another dimension to her suffering. For now we begin to know what their relationship was like. With the subtlety of his great art, the storyteller here gently runs our finger along the knife of the pain of this woman, who has been raped, has lost her husband, and then has scarcely had time to mourn his death before being sent for by the man who abused her to become his wife. As yet we have been given no sign that David loves her at all. Quite the reverse. His treatment of her is compared to murder, for the lamb in the story is slaughtered.

Now there can be no doubt left. The lamb in Nathan's parable is an innocent victim. Nothing could be clearer. And that means Bathsheba in chapter 11 was also an innocent victim. Unless, of course, both Nathan and God have seriously misjudged the events!

### The aftermath of the parable

#### (2 Sam. 12.7b-24)

Nathan follows the parable and his 'You are the man!' with two oracles of judgement. No longer does he speak as a trickster, but openly as a prophet, formally declaring the mind of God through sayings introduced by those sonorous words, 'Thus says the Lord'. The oracles elicit a confession from David, and then a final pronouncement of judgement by the prophet. That judgement is carried out almost immediately, but we witness David making a desperate attempt to avert it, and then see his reactions when he fails and it is carried out. Then, and only then, does Bathsheba reappear, but it is only for a single verse, and a further twelve chapters will go by before we hear of her again. We need to examine briefly the passages leading up to her reappearance, and then, of course, that verse itself.

We expressed our surprise that the parable concentrated on the rape of Bathsheba and did not touch on the murder of Uriah. The oracles of judgement go a little way towards redressing the balance. When so much space has been devoted to David's ultimately successful attempts to get rid of Uriah, we could hardly expect Nathan to leave the king's presence without pronouncing upon them. Nevertheless, when we take the two oracles together, and also look at Nathan's final judgement, we see that the greater emphasis still lies on the rape.

The first oracle, in 12.7b-10, begins with God rehearsing what he has done for David in the past. He lists his anointing him king, his rescuing him from Saul, his giving him Saul's daughter and his wives - 'I gave you your master's daughter and made his wives lie down in your bosom' (12.8)<sup>25</sup> - and his further gift of the house of Israel and Judah. In the context, the most interesting item here is the one about David's wives. Never mind that we have not heard before of David taking over Saul's harem (though we have heard of his marrying his daughter, Michal - see 1 Sam. 18.20-7). The very mention of David's wives, and the language this God employs, mean that the terms of the parable and its lamb lying in the poor man's bosom, and the taking of Bathsheba, are brought at once to mind. The focus is still on the rape. There is nothing in God's list to remind us of Uriah, and when God goes on to say, 'if that had been too little, I would have added much more', we naturally understand this to mean yet more wives. Gwilym Jones' somewhat cold remark conveys the sense if not, perhaps, the feeling of the text: 'Coveting Bathsheba was therefore unnecessary.'<sup>26</sup>

In verses 9-10 the oracle turns to the recent past, and here, for the first time since Nathan's entrance, we have mention of Uriah's murder. Twice God condemns it. Yet the taking of Bathsheba is also twice condemned, and the oracle closes with the words, 'for you have treated me with contempt, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife'. The oracle begins and ends with her, not with her husband. It is clear where the emphasis still lies.

It is sustained in the second oracle in verses 11-12, which is concerned exclusively with the crime against Bathsheba, and the punishment to fit it, and makes no reference to Uriah's murder at all. Nathan's final words in verse 14 share its focus and pronounce most terrible judgement on one of the consequences of the rape, the child to whom Bathsheba has given birth. David's confession, which immediately precedes them, is powerful in its simplicity, its plain speaking, and its brevity. In those respects its mere two words in the Hebrew balance the two earlier Hebrew words of

Bathsheba's 'I am pregnant': 'I have sinned against the Lord (12.13). To this Nathan responds: 'Yes, but the Lord has transferred your sin.'<sup>27</sup> You will not die, but because you have so utterly scorned the Lord, the child who has been born to you shall most surely die.' The child is to be another innocent victim. He will be the scapegoat that will bear David's sin away. His final illness and death will, by a prophet's divine decree, be an act of vicarious suffering that will ensure the life of the king.

But what of Bathsheba? Nathan the prophet and God have paid her much heed. Their minds have been chiefly on her, and to her plight they have continually returned. David's treatment of her has shaken them more deeply than his murder of Uriah. In effect they have declared the rape worse than murder. If we thought from the balance of chapter 11 and the character of the writing that the narrator regarded the attempted manipulation of Uriah and his death as much the more serious of David's crimes, then this chapter 12 has put us right. Yet the child who will die for the life of the king is Bathsheba's child also. As far as we know he is her firstborn. Neither Nathan nor God acknowledge that. In the death sentence they pronounce, they do not consider the loss and pain she will endure. And just in case we might try to defend them by suggesting Bathsheba would wish an end to a child born of rape we will soon hear of her grief. In the end both the prophet and God, having paid her such close attention, forget her.

The narrator himself almost does the same. As soon as Nathan has left the palace, the child falls ill, and the spotlight then falls on David as he pleads with God for him not to die, and after that once death has come, as he perplexes his servants by not mourning for the child (12.15b-23). Only at the very end of the crisis in Bathsheba mentioned: 'Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba . . .' (12.24a). That is all we will hear of her feelings for her child the only acknowledgement that she is, or was, his mother. It is the first and the only time she is called David's wife. It is the only suggestion we are given anywhere in her story that David might have any love for her. When in 12.5-6 he pronounced judgement on himself, he condemned 'the rich man' of the parable for having no compassion. Now, after he has been faced with the truth of what he has done, and after he has confessed his sin, he turns to Bathsheba, and, it seems, shows her some pity. For the first time he pays her some attention without abusing her.

Or does he? The whole verse reads like this: 'Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her and lay with her; and she bore a son. She<sup>28</sup> called him Solomon. The Lord loved him.

'In the circumstances her chief comfort would lie in having another child,' says John Mauchline,<sup>29</sup> and H. W. Hertzberg comments, 'When a mother has lost a child in the East today [Hertzberg was writing in the mid-1950s] she is usually told, "May God support your husband"; with great realism this refers to the begetting of a new child in place of the one who has been lost.'<sup>30</sup> However, those who have lost a child themselves, even through stillbirth or miscarriage, let alone after the child has lived for some time, know very well, and those who have not can readily appreciate, that no 'new' child can provide such compensation, or take the former child's place. If David himself supposes that one can, and if we read that supposition into his having intercourse with Bathsheba so soon and fathering another child, then he shows no more sensitivity towards his wife than Elkanah did towards Hannah when he suggested his love made up for her not having any children (1 Sam. 1.8). Though the wording and actions are not the same, David's behaviour here reminds us all too uncomfortably of the conclusion to the events of chapter 11, when with indecent haste he sent for Bathsheba and made her his wife. The initiative, the power, lay with him then. So they do here. *He* goes to *her*, *he* lies with *her*. She cannot help herself in bearing another son. What she thinks of it all, whether there is any love to be found here or not, we cannot tell. At least, if we believe the margin of the Hebrew text, and those commentators who think it gives the original reading,<sup>31</sup> she gives her son his name. It is a name of great renown. It is 'Solomon'. When eventually Bathsheba reappears in the story, she will not be called David's wife, but Solomon's mother. Then she will receive her identity, her significance, her status, not from any husband – not from the first one, who loved her; nor from the second, who raped her – but from her son. It will prove to be *nearly* the most that any woman in the court at Jerusalem could hope for.<sup>32</sup>

### Further disintegration

#### (2 Sam. 13–24)

The birth of Solomon is followed almost immediately by a story of another rape. Here there is no question about what is going on. It is one of the most vivid pieces of writing in the Old Testament. Tamar, David's daughter, is raped by his eldest son and her half-brother Amnon (2 Sam. 13). Absalom, David's third son and

Tamar's full brother, avenges her by having Amnon killed, and that leads indirectly to civil war, with Absalom attempting to seize his father's throne, and all but succeeding, before he is himself killed by Joab in the aftermath of a battle. David's return to Jerusalem at the end of the war is accompanied by a bitter dispute between the people of the two parts of his kingdom, Israel and Judah, and this leads to a second, though mercifully much shorter, period of civil war. 2 Samuel ends with a few chapters (21–4) that provide a series of appendices. They include a long psalm in which David sings heartily of his triumphs and vigorously protests his righteousness. It comes from another world, the world of the establishment that was interested in canonizing the founder of the dynasty, and is shockingly out of place after all the events that have transpired. Nevertheless, it reminds us, as David Gunn has pointed out,<sup>33</sup> of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2, and so in one sense brings the course of the Books of Samuel full circle.

It is a sorry tale, with only a few flashes of light in the darkness. There is no mention at any point of Bathsheba or of any of David's other wives, though twice we hear of his concubines. At the height of the war with Absalom, David flees from Jerusalem with his whole household, except for ten concubines whom he leaves behind 'to look after the house' (15.16). *In the circumstances, that is an impossible and dangerous task. When Absalom enters Jerusalem and is proclaimed king by his followers, the first thing he is encouraged to do is to take over what there is of the king's harem, to show that now he possesses his father's virility and authority. He only needs to be encouraged once, and after they have pitched a tent for him on the palace roof, the same roof that led to Bathsheba's undoing, he goes in and enjoys his spoil (16.20–2). Later, when the war is over and David reoccupies his palace, he places the same concubines in a prison, presumably because they did not succeed in the task he gave them, and because they wear the taint of his son's intercourse with them. There they remain, 'shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood' (20.3).* David Gunn's comment on these two fearful episodes is worth quoting at length:

Unable to keep in order his own house (family), unprepared to guard his own house (city and nation) [David] leaves ('forsakes', 15.16) the women he has taken for his pleasure. They are expected to do what he will not do – with a rapacious Absalom descending upon the palace! But now deeming them tainted by Absalom's intercourse, he will do what patriarchal

honour and political wisdom dictate. He 'takes' them and 'gives' them . . . a prison cell, 'the house of keeping'! Thus these women are condemned by a man's sin to be shut out of society. Their fate at the hands of Absalom and David compounds that of Tamar at the hands of Amnon and David (who offers her no help or consolation). They are both members and victims of David's house.<sup>34</sup>

To his mention of Tamar we would add ours of Bathsheba. She too is both member and victim of David's house, and so far has found little if anything but abuse there. With David's psalm in 2 Samuel 22 the Books of Samuel come full circle. With Bathsheba's story our own book has also returned to the beginning, not just to the treatment suffered by Hagar at the hands of Sarah and Abraham, or to that endured time and again by Sarah at the hands of Abraham, but to the abuse heaped upon the woman in the Garden by generations of commentators and theologians, whose efforts have made her as hard to discover in the text of Genesis as Bathsheba has been here in 2 Samuel.

But Bathsheba's story is not yet ended.

## Scene 2: Palace intrigue I – Bathsheba and Nathan

(1 Kings 1.1–14)

'Now king David was old and advanced in years . . . ' That is how the Books of Kings begin. In less than one and a half chapters he will be dead. Bathsheba has three important scenes to play before he dies, and two more soon after he is gone. There will be no mention of her own death. The deaths of kings get recorded here, not those of queens and queen mothers.<sup>35</sup>

The story of David's decline has been a long one. The remarkable candour with which it has been told is sustained in the account of his last days. He is presented to us in its opening verses as an old man who cannot get warm, however many bed-clothes his servants put on him. They suggest a plan to him that will involve the exploitation of yet another woman in his court and in his bed. They suggest the country be scoured for a young virgin, a very beautiful young virgin, who can act as his nurse, and who can 'lie in his bosom' – there is that phrase again – and give him some heat. David's courtiers are not merely concerned about saving him from hypothermia. The heat they are talking about includes sexual heat,

as they reveal by their talk of the woman sharing his bed. They mean to provide him with another concubine. But they are doing more than trying to give him some sexual pleasure. They are testing his virility, and, almost certainly, his fitness to rule.<sup>36</sup> Psalm 72 clearly indicates the connection the Israelite mind made between the well-being of the king and the fertility of the land. Strange though such a connection might seem to us, it was commonly asserted in the ancient Near East.<sup>37</sup> By its token an impotent king spelled an infertile land. David's servants are not just trying to cheer him up. They are putting him to a test that is of crucial importance for the life of the land and the prosperity of the people of his kingdom.

He fails. The young woman they find for him, Abishag (at least she is done the courtesy of having her name recorded), makes no difference. 'The king did not know her', we are told. The NRSV makes the sense plainer by translating, 'but the king did not know her sexually'. Quite. The suspicions of his servants were correct. He is impotent.

That means there is a crisis in the palace. It will not be necessary, as the rest of David's story will show, to dethrone him, but there is a need for one of his sons to become co-regent. Whoever is appointed will become sole ruler when David dies.

Things happen quickly: 'Now Adonijah son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, "I will be king"' (1.5). Adonijah is David's fourth son. Both Amnon and Absalom are dead, and his second son, Chileab, has not been heard of since he was first mentioned in a preliminary list of David's sons in 2 Samuel 3.3–5. Adonijah is presumably the eldest of those who have survived. Some scholars are quick to point out that with the monarchy and David's dynasty so young, it would not have been taken for granted that the eldest son would succeed to the throne.<sup>38</sup> But what they say would not have been presumed, Adonijah presumes, and in 2.15 he will claim that 'all Israel' presumes it also. In a royal family which has seen such appalling internal strife, a presumption of that kind is surely dangerous.

The terms the narrator uses to begin to describe Adonijah's actions, and the comments he introduces, only increase our sense of foreboding: 'he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. His father had never displeased him by asking, "Why have you done so and so?"' He was also a very handsome man. His mother had given birth to him after Absalom' (1.5b–6). Everything here, not just the man's name at the end, reminds us of Absalom and of his attempt to seize power from

David. In the prelude to his revolt we were told that Absalom was the most handsome man in all Israel (2 Sam. 14.25). At the very beginning of his bid for power we heard how he got himself a chariot and horses and fifty men to run ahead of him (2 Sam. 15.1). Before the start of what was to be Absalom's final battle, the only instruction David gave his generals was to 'deal gently' with his son (2 Samuel 18.5). When, against those instructions, he was killed, the king was so overwhelmed with grief that his troops were ashamed to celebrate their victory, and Joab had to remind him to put the needs of his army and the state above his own personal feelings (2 Sam. 18.33–19.7). Much earlier, David's affections for his first son, Amnon, had also prevented him from punishing him for his rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13.21). That had left Absalom a bitter man, intent on taking revenge, and that in turn had led to the rift between him and his father that widened into the chasm of civil war (2 Sam. 13.22ff.). Adonijah is not the only son whom David has over-indulged. With Amnon and Absalom the consequences were disastrous. Now that Adonijah is after the throne, memories suggest he has made a most inauspicious beginning. They will not deceive us.

Next we hear of a pro-Adonijah and an anti-Adonijah faction. The second is made up of the priest Zadok, the soldier Benaiah, David's bodyguard, of which Benaiah is the leader, the prophet Nathan, and Shimei and Rei. The last two we will not hear of again. It is not even certain from the Hebrew that Rei is a proper name. Only one of the others, Nathan, will play a crucial role in defeating Adonijah's bid for power.

Two names are missing from the list: Solomon and Bathsheba. The omission of Solomon's is surprising. One might have expected him to be among the first to challenge his brother's presumptions. In fact, while he will waste little time in getting rid of him once he himself is on the throne and his father is dead, he will not put himself forward as a rival candidate for power, and for the time being will remain a passive and colourless figure. The absence of Bathsheba's name from the list is surprising for another reason. She will be the one who will co-operate with Nathan in the plot to get her son anointed king in Adonijah's place. The conspiracy will, so far as we can see, belong to just the two of them, and Zadok and Benaiah will only reappear to perform the coronation. The narrator does not do justice to Bathsheba in leaving her out, unless he means to indicate that she really bore little responsibility for Solomon's coming to power, and was simply manipulated by the anti-Adonijah faction, and by Nathan in particular.

How we are to assess Bathsheba's part in these events is the most important question we will have to consider in this section of our study of her. Again, we will find scholars divided in their opinions. Again, we will have to sift the text very carefully for any clues the storyteller might give us. He has provided us with one already, in omitting Bathsheba from his list. Unfortunately it is not clear how we should read it.

The details of the factions are followed by Adonijah calling a great feast just outside Jerusalem. Nathan and Bathsheba will later represent it to David as a coronation feast. Whether that is Adonijah's purpose is not certain, but the guest list is clear enough. He invites all his brothers, all the king's sons, except one, Solomon. He also invites 'all the royal officials of Judah', and leaves out Nathan and Benaiah. Still there is no mention of Bathsheba. Presumably this is men's work, though if that is what he thinks, Adonijah has made a serious miscalculation, for the narrative will show that no one possesses more influence over David than the queen. Perhaps he thinks his father is past being consulted. If so, Nathan and Bathsheba will prove him wrong in that too.

Plainly things are reaching a critical stage, and the anti-Adonijah faction must act fast. Nathan approaches Bathsheba, and the anti-Adonijah party quickly becomes the pro-Solomon party. The events that now unfold take place while Adonijah's festivities are going on. The technique of the narrator is especially sophisticated here.

Then Nathan said to Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, 'Have you not heard that Adonijah son of Haggith has become king and our lord David does not know it? Now therefore, come, let me give you some advice. Save your life and the life of your son Solomon! Come, go to David the king and say to him, "Did not you yourself, my lord the king, swear to your servant, saying, 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he it is who shall sit on my throne?' Why then is Adonijah king?" And then, while you are still there speaking with the king, I will come in after you and fill in what you have said.' (1.11–14)

The way Nathan plays on Bathsheba's feelings is plain for us all to see. Not only does he suggest Adonijah's actions have put her and her son in mortal danger – a reasonable enough supposition in the circumstances – he also reminds her that Adonijah is not her son, but the son of her rival wife Haggith. Adonijah was introduced to us in 1.5 as Haggith's son. Now we can see that the narrator had

Bathsheba in mind in that earlier part of the chapter after all. Outside 1 Kings 1–2 Haggith is mentioned only in the course of the list of David's sons in 2 Samuel 3.3–5. Adonijah there appears as her only son. We know nothing else about her, but no doubt Bathsheba does, and Nathan exploits that knowledge. Third, Nathan reminds Bathsheba of an oath that David swore to her that Solomon would be king. Thus, in a few words, Nathan plays with Bathsheba's affections and ambitions for her son, conjures up fears for her safety and Solomon's, assumes she is caught up in the rivalries of the harem and has ambitions to be queen mother instead of Haggith, and brings to the surface memories of a long-established pact between her and the king.

One thing is curious. This is the first we have heard of any oath of David's that Solomon would succeed him. We have known from Solomon's birth that he is the one beloved of God, and therefore the one who will surely one day come to power. But God's special favour and a king's oath are two different things. Has Nathan made it up? Is he playing the trickster again, as he did before with that parable of the rich man and the poor? Some think so.<sup>39</sup> If he is, then he is asking Bathsheba to tell a momentous lie that might put her in danger if David sees through it, and himself also, when he follows her for his own audience with the king. For we have to remember we do not yet know where David's sympathies lie. We cannot assume he is Solomon's man. We have heard nothing at all about his relationship with him. All we know is that he has been in the habit of being overly indulgent towards *Adonijah*.

What are we to make of Bathsheba here? As Gwilym Jones observes, estimates of her 'range from attributing to her an important part as an ambitious, capable, energetic, shrewd and powerful queen-mother to making her a colourless and even stupid woman who was a mere instrument in Nathan's hands'.<sup>40</sup> We will have to see what she does with Nathan's advice. She gives him no verbal response, but goes straight to the king.

### Scene 3: The plot thickens – Bathsheba and David

(1 Kings 1.15–27)

So Bathsheba went to the king in his room. The king was very old; Abishag the Shunammite was looking after the king. Bathsheba bowed and did obeisance to the king, and the king said, 'What is the matter?' She said to him, 'My lord, you

yourself swore to your servant by the Lord your God and said, "Solomon your son shall succeed me as king, and he it is who shall sit on my throne." But now, look, Adonijah has become king, and you, my lord the king, know nothing about it! He has sacrificed oxen, fattened cattle, and sheep in abundance, and has invited all the king's sons, the priest Abiathar, and Joab the commander of the army. But Solomon, your servant, he has not invited. But you, my lord the king – the eyes of all Israel are on you to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. Otherwise, when my lord the king sleeps with his fathers, I and my son Solomon will find ourselves in the wrong.' (1.15–21)

This is the first time we have ever seen Bathsheba on stage saying anything. In 2 Samuel 11–12 she uttered just those two (in the Hebrew) words, 'I am pregnant', but we heard them from the lips of her messenger to David. She was not present to speak them for herself. Now we have a speech of some length, and of very considerable subtlety.

She is not in the easiest of situations. The king, presumably, is confined to his bed, and Abishag is there looking after him. Bathsheba must know why the young woman has been brought into the court. She herself is no longer young. When David's courtiers wished to test his potency, she was not considered for the task. Once she was taken by the king because of her beauty, but she cannot now compete with an Abishag, even if she wished to. She does not command the attention of the men of the court any more, and David's desire for her is long gone. Abishag is a reminder of all that.

Bathsheba and David do not, on the surface, meet as wife and husband. She bows to him, does him obeisance, calls him, 'my lord the king', and refers to herself as his 'servant'. She observes all the stiff etiquette of the court. Yet her status is clear, and she is making all the use of it she can. When Nathan comes into the king's room at the end of her speech, he will have to be announced, and will have to exhibit a greater degree of subservience by putting his face to the ground. When after that David pronounces judgement on the matter they have brought to him, he will send again for Bathsheba, and will address her alone. And, of course, why has Nathan approached her with his plan in the first place, if not because he realizes that she is the only one who has sufficient influence over the king? Bathsheba is not David's wife for nothing.

For all the authority she may possess, she is, according to

Gwilym Jones,<sup>41</sup> simply Nathan's accomplice. He has devised the plot, given her her part to play, and the words she is to speak. But for a mere accomplice she shows a remarkable degree of initiative and skill.

She begins by repeating the 'vow' that David once made to her. Thus far she is following Nathan's plan. Yet even at this juncture she puts her own stamp upon it. She turns Nathan's question, 'Did not you yourself, my lord the king, swear . . . ?' into a statement of fact: 'My lord, you yourself swore . . .'. What is more, she claims, as Nathan did not, that David took his oath in the name of the Lord his God. Thus she invests it with a far greater solemnity and power than Nathan gave it. She leaves no room for doubt about it in David's mind.

She does, however, still leave some room for it in ours. She does not clear up the question of whether this 'vow' is an invention or not. We will have noticed she did not challenge Nathan on the point. She did not say to him, 'What vow? I remember no vow.' But still we cannot be sure what to make of that. She may have acquiesced because she was used to doing what men told her to do without questioning them. But that is hardly the Bathsheba who emerges from the speech she makes here to David. She may have acquiesced because she immediately saw the cleverness of Nathan's ploy, thought that David would not see through it, and was sure it would work out to the advantage of herself and her son. Alternatively, she may have acquiesced because what Nathan said was true: David *had* made the vow. If indeed he had, then it would seem her part in the birth of the conspiracy is more significant than we might suppose from the narrative. For if Nathan knows of David's vow to Bathsheba, a vow which is not public knowledge, and which is not generally known in the court, who has told him? It cannot be David, for in his own speech to the king he will be careful to avoid giving the impression that he knows of any vow. It can only be Bathsheba. Has she then been plotting with him for some time? Is she the real instigator of the conspiracy to get her son on the throne? Is she another Rebekah?<sup>42</sup> When Nathan came to her with the news of the actions taken by Adonijah, was he merely impressing upon her that it was time to act? Is it Bathsheba who approaches David first, not just because she has more influence than Nathan, but because she is the prime mover in the plot? And is that why she is more forceful with David, turning Nathan's polite question into a statement of fact, and why it is she whom David will summon to hear who is to occupy his throne?

We cannot answer those questions, and we will never know the

answer to them. That is one of the fascinations of this opening to the Books of Kings. There is evidence on both sides, more than we have indicated already. Why, if the vow was truly made, did David or Bathsheba not tell Solomon? Nathan knows of it, but the first chapter of Kings makes it plain that Solomon and the rest of his supporters do not. On the other hand, if it is a fabrication, would Bathsheba and Nathan really have been able to trick David's memory on such a very serious matter? The king may be frail, but his final charge to Solomon in chapter 2 will reveal he has his mental faculties intact, and show us that his memory is still frighteningly accurate. In the end we will emerge from this tantalizing narrative still wondering, and still not knowing quite what to make of Bathsheba.

Yet several things are perfectly plain from her speech: her inventiveness, her resourcefulness, her cleverness, her grasp of the subtleties of rhetoric and her persuasiveness, what Celia Thomson calls 'her surfootedness in the way she steps into David's mind'.<sup>43</sup> She does not act as Nathan's lackey. Far from it. He may have played on her feelings, but she now plays on David's with just as much skill and determination. She goes a very long way beyond the brief Nathan gave her to remind the king of his 'vow'. She tells him of Adonijah's feast, and creates the clear impression that it has been called to celebrate his coronation. She emphasizes that it is going on behind David's back. She increases his fears by telling him that Adonijah has gained significant support in the army and among the priests. She makes clear Solomon's loyalty, not just by dissociating him from the plot, but by calling him David's 'servant'. She drops dark hints of what is in store for her and her son if David does not act. She reminds him of the authority he still holds, not merely by continually calling him 'king', but by conjuring up the picture of 'all Israel' hanging on his decision. By that description, which patently goes beyond the truth, she gives him the sense that all is not yet lost: the conspirators are few, and there is still time to undo their work. In the course of it she picks up once more the terms of the 'vow' with which she began.

It is, as Robert Alter acknowledges, 'a brilliant speech'.<sup>44</sup> Less charitably, and much less accurately, Richard Nelson calls her 'the fearful co-conspirator', and contrasts her with Nathan, 'the crafty instigator'; he is 'the wily manipulator', she 'the frantic mother'.<sup>45</sup> His judgements, particularly the second one regarding Bathsheba, owe more to destructive stereotypes than to the details of this most subtle and sophisticated of biblical texts.

Good as his word, Nathan comes on the scene as Bathsheba is

finishing. After he has gone, she will need to be summoned back, so we must think of her as leaving as soon as her words are over. For the moment she receives no response from the king, but Nathan's interruption is, of course, all part of their plan. His speech is not quite as long as Bathsheba's, but shares her brilliance:

'My lord the king, did you yourself say, "Adonijah shall succeed me as king, and he it is who shall sit on my throne?" For today he has gone down and has sacrificed oxen, fattened cattle, and sheep in abundance, and has invited all the king's sons, the commander of the army, and the priest Abiathar. There they are eating and drinking before him, and saying, "Long live king Adonijah!" But as for me, your servant, Zadok the priest, Benaiah son of Jehoiada, or your servant Solomon, he has not invited us. Is my lord the king responsible for this being done? Have you failed to let your servant know who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?' (1.24-7)

Nathan repeats just enough, he omits just enough, he adds just enough. He omits mention of any vow, as he must, for whether it is real or a lie, he cannot show he knows of a pact made between the king and queen that the king has not told him about. Yet twice, at the start of his speech and again at the end, he uses its terms and thus keeps it uppermost in David's mind. Like Bathsheba, he refers to Adonijah's feast, but he also emphasizes that it is going on even as he speaks, and adds further colour to her earlier description and underlines the treachery of the occasion by reporting (or inventing) cries of 'Long live king Adonijah!' He adds to her list of those who have not been invited, so that David is aware he still has a powerful faction of his own to call upon. And he ends with a reproach that he knows very well the king will wish to deny, and which will further increase his fear and his anger – the suggestion that David has been acting on the sly is bound to rub salt into his wound, bound to remind him of the way Adonijah and his band are acting behind his own back.

#### Scene 4: The plot succeeds – Bathsheba and David

(1 Kings 1.28-31)

The effect of these two speeches on David, coming as they do hard on the heels of one another, is clearly meant to be irresistible.

David does not resist. He summons Bathsheba at once. Since Nathan has to be sent for once this second audience with the queen is over, we must imagine him leaving David's room, just as we had to think of Bathsheba leaving after her speech.

The manner of Bathsheba's entrance and of her exit is interesting. She enters with no reported ceremony. 'So she came before the king and stood before the king' (1.28b). That is all the text says. We must not think of her as making a pointed omission of the etiquette she followed before. That would be to insult the king, and, for a ha'p'orth o' tar, would risk spoiling the ship she and Nathan are sailing so expertly. The omission is the narrator's, not hers. Its impact upon us, the readers of the story, is to emphasize her authority and her new power. We do not see her bowing to the king and obeising herself, because in truth it is David who is now doing her (and Nathan's) bidding. Thus before he opens his mouth we know what he will say.

The king swore, saying, 'As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life from every adversity, as I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, "Solomon your son shall succeed me as king, and he it is who shall sit on my throne in my place", so will I do this day.' (1.29-30)

This is the third time David has asked for Bathsheba. He 'sent and took her' when he raped her (2 Sam. 11.4); he 'sent and gathered her' when Uriah was dead and he seized his chance to make her his wife (2 Sam. 11.27). Now he 'summons' her, but this time there is no 'taking', no 'gathering', only speaking. This is the first and the last occasion on which we hear David speaking to his wife. He quotes and accepts the terms of the 'vow' presented to him, and agrees it must be put into effect immediately. Whether he has been duped, or simply had his memory jogged and been told how urgent things are, we still do not know. What is clear is the honour he does Bathsheba. The 'vow' described Solomon as *her* son. By leaving its terms as they are, David gives the impression he is settling the succession issue out of respect for her and the promise he made to her. When in the next few verses he gives instructions to Zadok, Nathan and Benaiah for Solomon's coronation, he will refer to Solomon as *his* son (see 1.33). But while Bathsheba is in the room, it is her son who will come to power. No wonder, then, that as she leaves his presence she bows with her face to the ground, does obeisance to her king, and cries, 'May my lord the king, David, live for ever!' Her exaggerated courtesy, the same as

was properly shown by Nathan at his entrance in verse 23, expresses her gratitude as eloquently as her words. Yet for the first (and last) time she dares to call her husband by his name. The courtesy of her obeisance hides her power. The manner of her speech reveals it. For the first time, perhaps, because we cannot be sure his consoling her after the death of their first child was welcome, he has given her something she wants. In return she calls him David. At long last she has proved a match for the king.

### Scene 5: Palace intrigue II – Bathsheba and Adonijah

(1 Kings 2.13–18)

The rest of 1 Kings 1 tells in dramatic terms of the coronation of Solomon outside the walls of the city. Adonijah and his supporters, still in the middle of their own feast, hear the noise of the celebrations, and as they are wondering aloud what it is going on, a messenger arrives to give them the news in all its alarming detail. Their feast is thus brought to an abrupt end, and Adonijah flees to take sanctuary at the altar of God's shrine, and begs for his brother's mercy. For the time being that is granted, on the condition that he does not put a foot wrong. Given the track record of the members of this particular family, we cannot expect that pardon to be in force for very long.

1 Kings 2 brings us beside David's deathbed, and to his final charge to the son who has been anointed as his successor. That begins with fine pious words about obeying God, but soon slips into the largely sordid business of the settling of old scores. With the loose ends of his reign now tied up, David dies and is buried. Soon he will be canonized as Israel's greatest king, as the one who embodied the ideals of kingship. All future kings will be measured against him, and almost invariably will be found wanting. Such are the larger ironies of this story which Israel told about herself.

In all this we have had no further mention of Bathsheba. But no sooner is her son the sole ruler than we see her again, not at first, as we might expect, with him, but with the disgraced Adonijah.

Then Adonijah son of Haggith came to Bathsheba, Solomon's mother. She said, 'Do you come peaceably?' 'Peaceably,' he said. Then he said, 'I have a matter to discuss with you.' She said, 'Go on.' He said, 'You know yourself that the kingship was mine, and that all Israel was firmly expecting me to

become king; but the kingship has turned about and become my brother's, for it was his from the Lord. Now I have one request to make of you; do not refuse me.' She said, 'Go on.' He said, 'Please, speak to Solomon the king – he will not refuse you – and ask him to give me Abishag the Shunammite as a wife.' Bathsheba said, 'Very well; I will speak on your behalf to the king.' (2.13–18)

This is another small masterpiece of writing. No adjectives are employed, no comment is made, no colour or explanation is added by the narrator. Apart from a string of she said/he said's (Hebrew narrative style is perfectly comfortable with such a thing), there is only direct speech, and not a great deal of that. Yet the storyteller conveys perfectly Adonijah's tentativeness and anxiety. His speech is halting and awkward. In the end he blurts out what he has come to say, but in getting there he says more than perhaps he meant to, certainly much more than is good for him. By contrast, Bathsheba remains calm, uses the minimum of words, and keeps her feelings strictly to herself. And again the storyteller tantalizes and leaves us wondering.

What is Adonijah up to? What does he really want? Some say he is after the throne, that his request for Abishag is a devious attempt to get control of Solomon's harem, and to gain access to Solomon's kingly power through the back door.<sup>46</sup> They remind us of the marriages David made for his own political advancement, and in particular of Absalom's taking over David's harem at the height of his revolt. Others argue that Adonijah could only be so brazen and unsubtle, and Bathsheba could only support such a claim, if they were imbeciles, and that what Adonijah wants is Abishag and no more.<sup>47</sup> The narrator has not given us Adonijah's motives. He has left us some freedom to speculate and disagree, and the clues he has hidden in the larger narrative and in the passage itself point in different directions. It is important we examine them, for they will bear upon our assessment of what Bathsheba herself is up to in going to Solomon so readily to press Adonijah's suit.

This is only the third time we have heard of Adonijah in the entire story of David and his sons. The first was a mere mention of him in the list of David's sons in 2 Samuel 3.2–5. The second was the episode we have already considered in 1 Kings 1. From that we have learned two things of significance: his impetuosity and his desire for power. What he wants is the throne, and in trying to get it he does not stop to think what others' reactions to his bid

might be. When we look again at his dialogue with Bathsheba, we see that his desire for power has not diminished. 'You know yourself that the kingship was mine, and that all Israel was firmly expecting me to become king', is how he begins. That is his preamble to his request for Abishag. It is hard for us to avoid interpreting his desire for her as a cover for his desire for the kingdom, and if it is hard for us, then surely it is equally difficult for Bathsheba. Certainly it will be impossible for Solomon. He will immediately jump to such a conclusion.

On the other hand, Adonijah does acknowledge to Bathsheba that the throne is Solomon's because of God's wishes. If we think he is being sincere in that, then his reference to the kingship is no more than an awkward expression of his disappointment, and his request for Abishag betrays no more than his lust. In that case, Solomon's reaction is paranoid. David's story has provided, after all, not only political marriages and the taking over of a harem, but also tales of lust and impetuosity, the tales of David and Bathsheba and of Amnon and Tamar.

If we cannot be clear about Adonijah, we cannot be certain about Bathsheba either. What is *she* playing at? How does *she* understand Adonijah's request? We will have to come back to those questions when we examine her last scene and her approach to Solomon. For the moment, we can observe how much her authority has grown. We noticed the power she had in the court in 1 Kings 1. That is even greater now. As Solomon's mother, she commands an attention and has an influence that she never had as David's wife, even at the end. Adonijah comes to her. This is the first time anyone has done that. With David, she was the one being sent for, or the one who had to go to him. Even Nathan was not recorded as seeking an audience with her when they hatched the plot to get her son on the throne. That scene was simply introduced with the words, 'Then Nathan said to Bathsheba'. Second, there is true dialogue between them, and it is Bathsheba who initiates it. She has never had that privilege before. In 1 Kings 1 she delivered her speech to David, and then later he made his to her and provoked her loyal response. But there was not the interchange between them, the toing and froing of speech we see here. Third, Adonijah puts himself at her mercy. No one has done that before. Nathan asked for her co-operation, and assumed she had more influence over David than anyone else at court, at least in the matter of Solomon's succession. Now Adonijah openly acknowledges that he depends on her and that Solomon will not refuse her. She has come a very long way since that late afternoon when David spied her bathing.

Abishag, of course, has come nowhere. She has no more power than she had with David. She still has no say in things, and the narrator still has not brought her out of the shadows. We still know nothing about her, except that she is still a pawn in men's games, in Adonijah's and the narrator's.

And she would seem now to be a pawn in a woman's game also, for Bathsheba takes Adonijah's request straight to her son.

## Scene 6: The plot crumbles – Bathsheba and Solomon

(1 Kings 2.19–24)

So Bathsheba went to king Solomon, to speak to him on behalf of Adonijah. The king rose to meet her and did obeisance to her; then he sat on his throne and set a throne for the queen mother, and she sat on his right hand. Then she said, 'I have one small request to make of you. Do not refuse me.' And the king said to her, 'Make your request, my mother; for I will not refuse you.' She said, 'Let Abishag the Shunammite be given to your brother Adonijah as a wife.' (2.19–21)

The contrast between her entrance in her third scene, when she went to speak with David, and this one could not be more obvious. Then she did obeisance to the king, now he does obeisance to her. David, it would seem, left her standing for the duration of each of her audiences with him. Solomon at once seats her on her own throne, and in the place of honour at his right hand (see Ps. 110.1). But is this the moment of her triumph or her folly? Adonijah said Solomon would not refuse her. Solomon himself assures her of that. Yet that is exactly what he does.

King Solomon answered and said to his mother, 'What are you doing asking for Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? Ask for the kingship for him! He is my older brother, after all! Ask it for him and for the priest Abiathar and for Joab son of Zeruiah!' Then king Solomon swore an oath by the Lord: 'So may God do to me and more, for Adonijah has devised this thing at the cost of his life! Now, as the Lord lives, who has established me and placed me on the throne of my father David, and who has made me a house as he promised, today Adonijah shall be put to death!' (2.22–4)

That marks the end of the audience. The next sentence records the killing of Adonijah, and after that we hear of the banishment of Abiathar the priest, the murder of Joab beside the altar of God, and then of the events leading up to Solomon's killing of Shimei, the last person left over from David's reign who might pose a threat to his power, and whom his father had ordered him to deal with. Thus Solomon comes in as David went out. We will not have mention of Bathsheba again, at least not in the Old Testament.

It would seem her short-lived triumph has been shattered by the ruthlessness and fear of her son. Or has it? Might she have got exactly what she came for? In 1 Kings 1 she played a key role in depriving Adonijah of the throne. It seems very strange that she should now fight his corner for him. Then she was keen to do all she could to protect the interests of her own son, and make sure he came to power. It is decidedly odd that she should now take willing part in a play that might smell so strongly of treachery, and which to Solomon's nostrils stinks of it. Burke Long suspects that Solomon's immediate reaction to the request for Abishag indicates further that Bathsheba may have anticipated the outcome all along: if the king can see through Adonijah's request so easily, or thinks he can, then surely Bathsheba must have the same suspicions, and must know very well what her son will do.<sup>48</sup>

We may think her a woman whose life is wholly one of being manipulated by men and of doing their bidding. We may possibly think her rather silly and impetuous herself, quite oblivious to the possible nuances of Adonijah's request, with no thought for how Solomon might react, but with a simple desire to please Adonijah. That, however, is not at all the woman who has emerged from the plot with Nathan. There she proved herself clever and astute, and whether she or Nathan was the prime mover of their scheme, she certainly did not speak to David as Nathan's puppet. She spoke with an authority of her own, an authority recognized by her husband and subtly drawn by the narrator, and one which has received further emphasis in these scenes with Adonijah and Solomon.

Furthermore, we can claim that she again exhibits considerable rhetorical skill in her audience with Solomon. She leads up to the request for Abishag by saying how small a thing it is. If she does suspect how *large* a thing it might be, and anticipates her son seeing it as such, then her making light of it is skilfully calculated to increase his anger when the request is made. When she comes to the request itself, she adds no further preamble. She could hardly give it the introduction Adonijah gave it, and refer to his

disappointment at not getting the throne. To do so would put her in danger of a charge of treachery, of acting in league with a usurper. So she does not attempt to wrap it up at all, but leaves it bare in all its starkness and ugliness. In her scene with David, she showed herself most inventive, ready to add to the brief Nathan had given her, and knowing exactly the right amount to say. We suspect that her skill has not left her. We suspect she means not to support Adonijah, but finally to destroy him. She has got him out of the way once. Now, we think, she tries to do so again, for good. Her plan works. Adonijah is hastily murdered, his friends are disposed of, and Solomon, her son, is now safe and secure on the throne she (with a little help from her friends) gave him.

If we pick up the hints given us by this most subtle of writers, that is the most natural way to interpret her actions, the most plausible picture of her that we can paint on the basis of the few lines drawn in the text. We might, of course, be wrong. In the end we cannot be absolutely certain whether her final scene represents the height of her triumph, or a last return to her former tragedy.

### A final footnote

#### (*Matthew 1.6*)

Bathsheba will feature once more in the Bible. Without her name, alas, and, interestingly enough, under her old title of 'the wife of Uriah' – and in the company of the Tamar of Genesis 38, Rahab the prostitute of Jericho, Ruth the Moabite, and Mary – she will appear at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, in the genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus we leave her in the courtly circle of another 'king of the Jews', another 'king of Israel' (Matt. 27.37, 42), who Matthew tells us 'is called Messiah' (1.16), and who, at several points in his Gospel, including its very first verse, appears as 'the son of David'.