

SPCK

THE OLD TESTAMENT
IN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

WIVES, HARLOTS AND
CONCUBINES

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Summary

The verses which name Zeruiah are buried in episodes which report the activities of men. For this reason, and because the woman is identified not as person but as mother, in relationship to sons, they may be considered patriarchal narrative reports. Nevertheless, a woman, Zeruiah, replaces a man in the identification of three sons and that small detail needs to be recognized as an exception to the pervasive custom of the culture.

Bathsheba: David's Victim (2 Samuel 11-12)

The Story

It is the custom of kings to go out to battle during the spring but David does not do what kings normally do. He lets his general and his people go out to war, but he stays home (11:1). While at home, after his afternoon siesta, he goes for a stroll on his roof and looks out at a beautiful woman bathing (v 2). David wants the woman. Though she is possessed by another—she is identified as the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah—he takes Bathsheba and lies with her (vv 3-4). When the woman realizes that she is pregnant, the narrator tells us that she informs David (v 5). In the entire story the character Bathsheba never speaks.

David then plots to recall Uriah from battle and get him to sleep with his wife. The plan, however, proves unsuccessful. Uriah is unwilling to enjoy his wife while the rest of Israel is at battle (vv 6-11). Even when David deliberately gets Uriah drunk to weaken his resistance, Uriah does not submit (vv 12-13). The first plot having failed, David then schemes to secure Uriah's death in battle, a plan which succeeds (vv 14-17).

Joab executes David's will. He orders Israelite soldiers, including Uriah, to approach the enemy's city walls. Such strategy could facilitate victory but only at the cost of many Israelite lives. David might object to Joab's use of this strategy because it would cause the deaths of many Israelites, even allowing women to participate in the defense of their city and these deaths; however, David applauds the

Interpretation

Historical critics, in interpreting this text, note the absence of a similar version in the Book of Chronicles with its "whitewashing" of the hero David. They suggest some historical basis for this text, though his interpretation (2 Sam 12) is considered a deuteronomistic insertion which explains, according to deuteronomistic theology, that David was punished for his sin. His sin is there twice named as taking Uriah's wife to be his own (12:9-10) and David's punishment includes his wives being taken and given to another (v 11).

Literary critics point to the contrast between the characters of David and Uriah. Uriah is a non-Israelite, a Hittite, yet he proves more faithful than the Israelite king. David apparently thought nothing of having sexual intercourse—even with women not his own—while his soldiers were out on the battlefield; Uriah, standing in solidarity with the soldiers, sacrificed sex, even with his wife. Literary critics suggest that v 1 serves as a foreshadowing of David's inappropriate behavior: while most kings are with their soldiers on the battlefield, David has stayed home. David is portrayed as totally selfish, plotting—at all costs, even murder—to hide the fact that he had impregnated Bathsheba. In contrast, Uriah is portrayed as a man of highest integrity. There is also contained in the text the subtle implication that just as women can destroy soldiers who come too close to the city walls, a beautiful woman can destroy the great David. He takes somebody else's property, that is, Uriah's wife, and his punishment includes the fact that somebody else takes his property, his concubines (2 Sam 16:22).

Feminists are particularly sensitive to how male chauvinists have

misinterpreted the character of Bathsheba. The text in no way suggests that her bathing was immodest. David was on the roof of his palace (the highest roof in Jerusalem?), looking down. From there he could see the whole city, and everyone in it. In addition, the text does not indicate whether or not Bathsheba had any choice in the matter. David sent for her and she came, but he, after all, was king. One did not lightly ignore the command of the king. And there is no reason to suspect that Bathsheba knew what David wanted before she arrived anyway. In fact, the contrary is more likely. After all, Bathsheba was a married woman; she belonged to someone else. Israel had laws regarding taking someone else's wife (e.g., Exod 20:17). Deuteronomy 22:22 even provides that "if a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman and the woman." David was Israel's leader. He was to be an example of covenant fidelity!

When Bathsheba found out that her husband had been killed, she mourned for him. Whether her mourning was simply to fulfill ritual law, or whether she truly cared for Uriah and lamented his death, the reader will never know. In any case, any pregnant woman with no husband—especially a woman whose pregnancy was not due to her husband!—had every reason to mourn! She had become the truly powerless person in ancient Israel. The narrator reports that when the period of mourning had passed, David sent for Bathsheba. She then became David's wife and bore him their son.

The patriarchal culture of ancient Israel justifies Bathsheba's action in marrying David in at least three ways. First of all, if she had been raped, then, since she had become a widow, she was eligible to marry the man who had violated her (e.g., Deut 22:28). Second, a widow, with or without a fatherless son, was powerless in Israelite society. Since access came only through the man to whom she was attached, a widow's remarriage was certainly most desirable. Bathsheba would not likely refuse any man who was willing. Third, in this particular case, Bathsheba would be marrying the father of her child.

Yet the text screams out the victimization of Bathsheba. First, it is possible—even likely—that she was taken against her will;

Summary

Because of David's sin the child whom Bathsheba bore died (2 Sam 12:14). David sinned and, according to deuteronomistic theology, David was punished. But who notices that David sinned and *Bathsheba* was punished? Few commentators point out that the loss of her son was an injustice rendered to Bathsheba. In the patriarchal culture which produced the text, there was no injustice. The woman become wife belonged to her man, and she could expect nothing but to partake of his punishment. As possessed person, she was again victim.

For the time being, Bathsheba was deprived, through no fault of her own, of that access to power which was available to woman as mother. Bathsheba did, however, bear David another son, Solomon (1:24), and Solomon, with Bathsheba's help, succeeded David as king (e.g., 1 Kgs 1:17). The reader may conclude that Bathsheba

Second Samuel 12 addresses David's greed as a reason for the problem of his future, but interpreters often fail to exploit fully the fact that what happened was his problem, not Bathsheba's! David is never accused of sinning against Bathsheba—though he may have raped her and secured her husband's death. Rather, David's sin is understood to have been against God and against Uriah, the man who possessed Bathsheba. And David's punishment is not understood to be against his concubines who become sexual objects for another man. They are given no consideration. They are possessions of David who must be surrendered to another man, in payment for his having seized the possession of Uriah!

Second Samuel 12 addresses David's greed as a reason for the even murder.

Selfishness would stop at nothing—seduction, manipulation, then, she is widowed because of the manipulations of the man who will become her future husband; then she "should be happy" to marry her rapist. Most horrifying of all is the fact that many commentators not only fail to understand Bathsheba's character as victim; they denounce her as seductress. That she was bathing and that she was beautiful are given as "explanations" for David's actions, as if taking a bath and being beautiful are somehow faults she committed. On the contrary, David's greed and David's selfishness would stop at nothing—seduction, manipulation,

possessed more power than most women who lived in Israel during the tenth century B.C.—she was queen and then queen mother—yet Bathsheba's power was by virtue of her roles, the only roles the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel allowed women. She was the wife of King David and the mother of King Solomon. Her power derived from the influential men in her life!

Tamar: Victim of Incest and Rape (2 Samuel 13)

The Story

In this chapter Absalom is identified as the son of David, Tamar as the sister of Absalom, and Amnon as the son of David (v 1). The way the characters are identified foreshadows what will transpire among them. Amnon loved his virgin sister Tamar (vv 1, 4). He was tormented by the passion but he could not conceive of acting on it. His friend Jonadab conceived a plan. Amnon was to pretend to be sick, and to request from his father that Tamar be sent to provide for him. Amnon did as Jonadab suggested (vv 3–6) and the plan worked. David told Tamar to go to Amnon's tent to attend to his needs and she obeyed. Amnon, however, refused to eat the food Tamar had prepared for him until everyone had departed and he was alone with her. He then requested that Tamar come near him; when she did, he grabbed her and ordered her to lie with him. Up to this point in the narrative, Tamar has not spoken. Amnon has spoken, Jonadab has spoken, David has spoken. Tamar's first words are to reject Amnon's request. What he is asking is not acceptable behavior in Israel. By so acting, he would sin and she would be disgraced. She asks him to go about this the right way: to ask her father for her. He refuses and forces himself upon her (vv 7–14). Amnon's love for Tamar then turns to hate and he orders her to leave. Again, she speaks and again her words plead that he not act as he intends. Sending her away would be a greater wrong than raping her. Again, he refuses her request (vv 15–16). The narrator informs the reader that Tamar had been wearing a long robe cus-

tomary for virgins. To symbolize the grief, she put ashes on her head, she tore her robe. Tamar wept (vv 17–19). Her brother Absalom (cf. v 1) concluded what had happened and tried to console her. He took her in. When David heard what had happened, he was angry. Absalom's response was to hate Amnon (vv 20–22).

Interpretation

Historical critics include the chapter as part of the Succession Narrative. The text will eventually exclude two sons of David, Amnon and Absalom, from being contenders for David's throne. The text also contributes to the working out of the punishment promised David after his theft of Bathsheba and Uriah's murder: the sword would not depart from his house (12:10).

Literary critics mark the contrast between love and hate. Amnon loved his sister Tamar (vv 1, 4); after the rape, Amnon hated his sister Tamar (v 15); Absalom hated Amnon for what he had done to Tamar, a foreshadowing of things to come (v 22). They point also to the careful construction of the story. Though v 1 introduces both Absalom and Amnon as sons of David, it introduces Tamar as Absalom's sister; it is Absalom, not David, who will take Tamar in and avenge her. At this stage in the larger narrative, the two brothers are strongly contrasted. Absalom is the protector of the innocent while his brother is the evil oppressor. Feminist interpretation points to the woman as victim of incest and rape. She obeys her father David's request to provide for her brother Amnon, but David does not later provide for her! When she speaks it is to uphold the laws of Israel. She does not reject Amnon; she will become his if he so wishes. He need only get her from her father. (She belongs to her father, not to herself; if he agrees—which she thinks he will—she will consent.) What Tamar does reject is the way Amnon wishes to take her; she loses. Amnon may, and with good reason (cf. Deut 22:22), believe that David will not consent. He does not seem to care; he wants Tamar and he will take her. Tamar again upholds the laws of Israel when she begs Amnon to keep her after he has raped her (cf. Deut 22:28–29). Who would want to marry one's rapist, especially under the circumstances as