

July 25, 2021
II Samuel 11:1-15
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In my research this week about this passage, there was one thing that really surprised me. That was how many scholars and religious leader through the ages have tried to excuse what David did. It's not really all that bad, right? I'm sure there must be some reasons behind what has happened. There must be some mitigating circumstances, because we know that David is "a man after God's own heart." So, he really couldn't be this cold blooded, could he? This is what people have thought through the ages, from the discussions of this story among the rabbis to the numerous treatments of the story in literature and film. David and Bathsheba. What do *we* think of this story? Are we tempted to try to find a way to make David not look so bad? Are we tempted to find an excuse for what he did to Bathsheba and to Uriah?

That's often exactly what we do. Perhaps the most common way of doing this is to blame Bathsheba. Blame the woman. That excuse has not changed for all these thousands of years. It's called "scapegoating." It's not really David's fault, he's the king, he's really a good guy, so it must be her fault. One commentator in the early twentieth century said about this story, "No one of good moral character could have acted as she did in her seduction and conquest of David. She doubtless exposed herself that the king might be tempted; she willingly came to the palace when she was sent for; and conspired with David for the murder of her husband."¹ This scapegoating of Bathsheba as the temptress was even present in some of the ancient rabbinic discussions of this story, trying to soften David's guilt. Many of you know that in the Bible the book of Chronicles covers the

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Wharton, Bryan. *Famous Men of the Old Testament*. 1903. P. 213.

same time period as the books of Samuel and Kings, but was written several hundred years later. When it comes to the story of David, the Chronicler leaves this story out altogether. There are even some recent movies and books that show Bathsheba being seductive and portray her as the initiator of the relationship. Joseph Heller's book "God Knows" has Bathsheba say, "I made up my mind to meet you. A king and all that too—who could resist: So I began bathing on my roof every evening to attract you."² Make it her fault. In the last few years perhaps we have begun to see how much we still do that when a woman is assaulted like this. We scapegoat. But does the text give us any justification at all to do this?

Another thing we do with stories like this is that we rationalize. We try to find some excuse for David to justify his actions. Some of you may remember the 1985 film, *King David*, with Richard Gere as the king. In that telling of the story Bathsheba reveals to a shocked David that Uriah is an abusive husband, therefore giving David a noble motive for getting rid of the evil husband and rescuing an abused woman. In one of the discussions by the rabbis in ancient times the claim was made that these events were due to the fact that Uriah was a Hittite and shouldn't have been married to an Israelite wife anyway and so that justified David taking action against him.³

And in addition to scapegoating and rationalizing, one of our favorite things to do is to romanticize this story. We want to say that this is really a love story between a lonely king and a woman that he happened to see one day and fell in love with her. In the old movie *David and Bathsheba* from 1951 with Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, Uriah is

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Heller, Joseph. *God Knows*. 1984. P. 312.

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The New Interpreter's Bible, vol 2. P. 1289.

a soldier with no interest in his wife, David is a lonely man in his powerful office, and Bathsheba is a neglected wife who finds her true love in David.⁴ But does the text justify this reading at all? It really doesn't. David seems to have no interest in an ongoing relationship until he discovers that Bathsheba is pregnant, and then he prefers the solution of trying to cover up his sin and make people believe that Uriah is the real father. Good romances do not really begin with sexual assault and end with murder, but that is what we have here. It is too easy for us to romanticize violence and the blaming and abuse of women, from ancient times until today.

This is really the story of the fall of David. We have seen him as a shepherd and a warrior and a king and a faithful follower of God. But now we see him as a sinful man and doing whatever he can to cover it up. And the results of this fall will of course now haunt David for the rest of his life. His family and his kingdom will begin to fall apart. The stories following this one are about the problems that begin to arise among the children that he has from numerous different wives. One of them will lead a rebellion against him and the others begin to argue about who will succeed him.

But this is not just a story about David. It is a story about us. This is not just what David did and how we like to find excuses for him, it is about us and how we try to find excuses for ourselves. Isn't that what we really are doing. If we can excuse David, we can excuse ourselves. It's really not so bad what David did. That's a quick way to say, it's not so bad what I did. That something that all of us do. When we do something selfish, or unthinking, or even cruel, don't we quickly come up with some excuses? Wait, I really didn't mean that, what I meant was this . . . Or we try scapegoating—it's not really my

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Ibid.

fault, it never would have happened if she hadn't done this or he hadn't done that. Or we rationalize—in this case it was ok for me to be mean because I really had in mind the greater good, or it makes sense for me to be really selfish because I really deserve this. Or we romanticize—I'm really doing this out of love, I bad mouthed that person because I'm really in love with that person they are with and love is the highest good right, I just couldn't help myself.

The excuses we gave to David are excuses we give to ourselves. And when we do that, doesn't the same thing happen to us? Relationships begin to fall apart. Next week we will see what happens when David is confronted with his actions. Will he find an excuse or will he be honest? Are we strong enough to be honest that our motives aren't always pure and open ourselves up to the forgiveness of those who love us and the forgiveness of God? And are we strong enough to see our loved ones as imperfect human beings, just as we are, and offer them our forgiveness?