



**THE WIFE OF URIAH THE HITTITE:
POLITICAL SEDUCTRESS, WILLING PARTICIPANT,
NAÏVE WOMAN, OR #BathshebaToo?
THE PREACHER AS SENSITIVE THEOLOGIAN**

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וַיְהִי לַעֲתָה הָעָרֶב וַיָּקָם דָּוִד מֵעַל מִשְׁכָּבוֹ וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ עַל-גַּג בַּיִת-
הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֵּרָא אִשָּׁה רֹחֶצֶת מֵעַל הַגָּג וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מְרָאָה
מְאֹד: וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד וַיְדַרֵּשׁ לָאִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלוֹא-זֹאת בַּת-שֶׁבַע
בַּת-אֱלִיעֶזֶר אִשְׁתֵּי אֹרִיָּה הַחֲתָן: וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד מַלְאָכִים וַיִּקְחֶהָ
וַתְּבוֹא אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ וְהִיא מְתַקְדָּשֶׁת מִטְּמֵאָתָהּ וַתִּשָּׁב
אֶל-בֵּיתָהּ: וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתַּגִּד לְדָוִד וַתֹּאמֶר הֲרָה
אֲנִכִּי:

And it came to pass at the time of the evening, and *David* rose up from his bed and *he* walked around on the roof of the house of the King, and *he* saw a woman bathing/washing from the roof, and the *woman* was beautiful of appearance—exceedingly.

And *David* sent and *he* inquired about the woman. And he said “is not *this* Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?”

And *David* sent messengers and *he* took her and *she* came to him and *he* lay with her, (and *she* was purifying herself from her uncleanness) and *she* returned to her house.

And the *woman* conceived and *she* sent and *she* told David and *she* said, “pregnant I am (2 Samuel 11:2-5, *writer’s translation*).”

ABSTRACT

What role, if any, did Bathsheba play in one of the most egregious moral periods in the life of King David? Is Bathsheba herself culpable in the catastrophic moral failure of David in 2 Samuel 11 and 12? Standing at one end of the exegetical continuum on these questions are those scholars who answer by asserting that Bathsheba was a seductress. Her bathing on the roof was a trap she set to seduce the King. Since Bathsheba tempted the King and enticed him with her seductive bait, she bears some of the blame for what happened in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

In one of his sermons on this text, John Calvin took something comparable to a middle of the road position on these questions and maintained that while Bathsheba was not an enchantress, she was naïve, thoughtless, evincing a disturbing lack of awareness about the seductive implications of bathing outside. She should have known better.

Somewhat outraged at the other end of the continuum are those exegetes who claim that Bathsheba was neither a seductress nor naïve, but a victim. According to these scholars, all of the blame should be placed at the feet of King David. David abused his power, raped Bathsheba, murdered her husband. David alone was culpable.

This paper will revisit the issue of Bathsheba's status (seductress, naïve woman, victim) in 2 Samuel 11 and 12 and attempt to shed more light on this concern by using some exegetical tools from Cognitive Hermeneutics and present some homiletical implications for the preacher as a sensitive theological expositor a #MeToo and #ChurchToo world.

INTRODUCTION

Next to Genesis 3, Second Samuel 11 and 12 may be one of the most disturbing accounts in Hebrew narratives¹. In 2 Samuel 11, David's sin is so sudden, brutal, and unexpected, and so devastating in its outcome that according to Brueggemann "it

rivals in power the original act of Adam and Eve.”² In 2 Samuel 12, the forgiveness granted to David (2 Sam 12:13-14), and the close narrative proximity of grace (2 Sam 12:24-25) and victory (2 Sam 12:26-31) to the sordid affair seems to be as scandalous as the sins committed.³

But what role did Bathsheba play in this sordid affair? Does Bathsheba share some of the blame in King David’s shocking moral failure and egregious abuse of power in 2 Samuel 11? Across the centuries, exegetes have offered a number of answers to the Bathsheba question, answers ranging from labelling Bathsheba as a seductress to sympathizing with her as a victim of the royal abuse of power.⁴ This paper will summarize some of the interpretive positions about Bathsheba’s exegetical status, i.e., seductress, willing participant, immodest naive woman, and victim in 2 Samuel 11 and attempt to shed some fresh light on these questions by examining these issues in light of some assumptions and exegetical tools from Cognitive Hermeneutics.

INTERPRETIVE READINGS

Seductress and Temptress

Branding Bathsheba as David’s seductress is ancient as Rabbinic exegesis. These Jewish scholars could not deny David’s egregious sin and high crimes in 2 Samuel 11. However, due to the way the narrator depicts David in the preceding chapters of 2 Samuel 11, and because of their commitment to David and his line, they concluded that some mitigating external circumstance must have occurred to explain how David, Israel greatest king, could succumb to such an egregious act of adultery that culminated in premeditated murder. Their exegetical solution was to claim that Bathsheba deliberately bathed on the roof where the king could see her, using her visible beauty and physical assets to set a trap to seduce the King.⁵ Since Bathsheba tempted the King, enticing him with her seductive bait, she bears some of the blame for David’s moral failure. Note that this exegetical attempt does not eliminate David’s guilt and

responsibility, but minimizes it at Bathsheba's expense. A number of scholars still espouse some version of this reading. For example, Eugene Merrill in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* on Samuel writes:

One may not fault David for perhaps seeking the cooler breezes of the late afternoon, but Bathsheba, knowing the proximity of her courtyard to the palace, probably harbored ulterior designs toward the king. Yet David's submission to her charms is inexcusable for the deliberate steps he followed to bring her to the palace required more than enough time for him to resist the initial, impulsive temptation (cf., James 1:14-15).

Willing Participant

Other scholars draw an inference from the narrative that although Bathsheba was not a temptress, she was a willing participant, nonetheless. They base this inferential reading on verse 4: "David *sent* messengers and he *took* her and *she came to him* and he *lay* with her." Three verbs in rapid succession, sent, took, and lay, show the lustful rush of David's passion, but between the taking and the laying is the statement that "*she came to him.*" Thus, in the mind of some readers, that fact that the narrator says "she came to him" means that this was not completely a matter of force. Bathsheba came willingly. Moreover, in this inferential reading, Bathsheba considered it an honor to be noticed by the king. She, therefore, participated of her own free will in the adulterous act, sharing the blame and guilt with David, and the same time lessening David's culpability. Erdmann's words in Lange's *Critical Commentary* represent this view:

The *narrative leads* us to *infer* that Bathsheba came and submitted herself to David without opposition. This undoubtedly *proves* her participation in guilt, though we are not to assume that her bathing was "purposed," in order to

be seen. She was moved by vanity and ambition in not venturing to refuse the demand of the King.

Naïve and Immodest Woman

Reformer, systematic theologian, pastor, and expositor John Calvin in a sermon on 2 Samuel 11 does not accuse Bathsheba of deliberate seductive behavior. However, he faults her for a lack of discretion and a lack of modesty that resulted in her inadvertently becoming in Calvin's words "a net of the devil,"⁶ igniting a fire of lust in David's heart. She was naïve, thoughtless in this regard. She should have known better.

Following Calvin's interpretation of Bathsheba, 20th century American Radio Bible teacher, J. Vernon McGee, across national and international radio waves also faulted Bathsheba for her lack of modesty and discretion. He then applies this understanding of Bathsheba's immodesty to contemporary life by saying:

At the risk of sounding like a prude, let me say we are living in a day when women's dress has become a great temptation to men. I wonder how many women, even Christian women, realize what they are doing when they wear certain types of apparel. I have attended services in many churches in which the soloist would get up and carry you to the gates of heaven. Then I have *seen* her sit down and carry you to gates of hell. It is my opinion that this women Bathsheba was partially guilty. What was she doing bathing in public?⁷

Victim

For centuries one the above three reading of Bathsheba was common, with pride of place being given to the first reading, but this interpretive situation changed with the advent of feminist interpretation of the Bible and emergence of other voices in the interpretive process. In an effort to redeem the reputation of Bathsheba and clear her name from what was considered to be

the mainly male interpretive misrepresentation of her character, these women scholars proposed another interpretive reading—Bathsheba was not a seductress, she was not a willing participant, she was not an immodest woman, she was victim. Even some women interpreters who were not a part of the critical feminist movement in biblical studies as such, did not embrace the traditional reading of Bathsheba. In the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, Joyce Baldwin (former principal of Trinity College) argues that in 2 Samuel 11 Bathsheba is not a seductress or a willing participant or an immodest woman, but a victim of David's lust and abuse of power.⁸

In short, these are four reading of Bathsheba. It is outside of the scope of this paper to include other reading, but these are offered to set the stage for the next section of this paper.

COGNITIVE HERMENEUTICS

In light of this discussion, how should we understand Bathsheba's role in 2 Samuel 11? Is our construal of her simply a function of male and female interpretive lens? Recently cognitively oriented literary scholars and interpreters have argued that the assumptions and analytical tools of cognitive grammar enable biblical scholars to place their interpretive conclusions on a firmer footing. In order to see if this argument holds up, Cognitive Hermeneutics in the framework of Cognitive Grammar will be applied to the Bathsheba question in 2 Samuel 11.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all that is involved in cognitive hermeneutics, but what is offered here are some assumption and a basic interpretive posture that will be applied to the issues raised about the role of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11.

Guiding Assumptions

The following are three guiding assumptions that shape the exegetical analysis in this paper.

Grammatical and Syntactical Structure is Overt

The first assumption is grammatical structure is overt and does not conceal a deep or underlying structure. What the interpreter actually sees in a text is what is there. Therefore, the need is skill in interpreting the overt grammatical and syntactical organization of texts and sensitivity to the stylistic and rhetorical strategies of the surface structure. In this paper the focus is on the overt grammatical and syntactical realities of 2 Samuel 11 and the way the narrator has organized the narrative to construe Bathsheba through overt grammatical organization.

Grammatical and Syntactical Structure is Semantically Motivated

The second assumption is grammar, syntax, and word order are semantically motivated. Grammar, syntax, and word order are the linguistic means that people use to construe reality. Through the use of word choice, grammar, and word order people have the ability to highlight one aspect of a given situation at the expense of another aspect of the same situation. The construal of reality through grammatical and syntactical organization is semantic in motivation.

Semantics is Encyclopedic in Scope

The third assumption is meaning in encyclopedic in scope. While overt grammatical and syntactical surface structure is the concern in this paper, surface grammatical structure and syntactical details suggest more than their apparent compositional semantic content. The overt grammatical structure may activate larger and relevant networks of knowledge stored in a reader's mind, making meaning comprehension possible and enriching the meaning of the surface structure.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Close Reading of the Surface Structure

Based on the linguistic assumptions of this paper, the method proposed is the following: Close reading⁹ of the surface structure. Take the surface structure seriously.

1. Follow the grammar and word order of the text—semantic motivation
2. Allow the surface structure to suggest gaps¹⁰
3. Allow the surface to active larger networks of shared meaning between the writer and the reader. Some of these larger networks include conceptual categories and knowledge of Scripture that make the use of intertextual echoes and allusions possible in narrative texts.

A Close Reading of 2 Samuel as it Relates to Bathsheba

A Close Reading Overview

A close reading of the surface structure of 2 Samuel 11 is itself a challenging exercise. But if we follow the grammar, word order, and rhetorical strategy of the narrator as expressed in the surface structure of the narrative the following is obvious: David stays in Jerusalem while his men are away at war. After an afternoon siesta, he rises from his bed, takes a casual stroll on the roof of his palace, and sees a woman bathing. At this point, the surface structure narration gives the impression that the actions so far in the narrative are not premeditated.¹¹ This is not a bare and neutral description of the facts.

Bathing

But what about the issue of Bathsheba's Bathing? The Hebrew term translated by "bathing" is *rāḥaṣ*. It is used three times in the account, first as a participle in verse 3, as an imperative in verse 8 where

it is translated as 'wash,' and as a wayyitol in 12: 20: Then David arose from the earth and washed....." The term means to cleanse with water. Sometimes *rāḥaṣ* was used for the cleansing of a part of the body with water in routine (Gen. 43:31) and ritual contexts (Exo. 30:19-21, 40:32). In some circumstances, the cleansing of the feet was an expression of hospitality (Gen. 18:4, 24:32, 43:24). In these cases, *rahas* is translated by the word "wash." In other surface structure syntactical contexts, *rahas* was used for the cleansing of the whole body in routine (Exo 2:5, Ruth 3:3) and ritual contexts (Lev. 14:9, 15:16, 16:4, 24). In these contexts, *rahas* is translated as "bathe." The surface structure use of *rahas* does not indicate if Bathsheba's washing or bathing was routine or ritual in nature nor does it indicate that she was nude. But as we will see the larger suggests that it may have been a ritual washing.

Moreover, the larger contextual background information activated by this statement includes the notion that Middle Eastern homes did not have indoor plumbing. Thus, Bathsheba was probably washing at home in her courtyard, in the privacy of her own home. Furthermore, it was inappropriate to look and gaze into another person courtyard under these circumstances. Bathsheba is not being immodest here nor should she be faulted for bathing or washing in her own home. David's voyeurism is the problem.

Descriptive Statement

Following the surface structure, we note that the narrator stops the action at the end of verse 2 and makes a descriptive comment about the woman: "And the woman was beautiful of appearance—exceedingly." The physical description of people is rare in Scripture and these rare physical depictions call reader and listener attention to them for interpretive reasons. These descriptions set up initial reader expectations or signal motivations for the action of other characters in the account. The surface structure physical description activates this larger network of understanding for those who were familiar with the use of physical descriptions in Book of Genesis and in earlier sections of Samuel.

Relational Identification

Thus motivated by the visual, David sends and inquires of the woman and learns who she was. She has a name, Bathsheba. She is the daughter of Eliam. It is likely that Eliam named here is the Eliam, the son of Ahithophel of 2 Sam 23:24. Bathsheba then is the daughter of one of David's mighty men and granddaughter of one of his most trusted advisors. She is also the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's mighty men. She is married, and is associated with the loyal men of his inner circle. The overt grammatical identification of Bathsheba serves as a trigger to activate shared knowledge of the Decalogue and texts in Leviticus: Ex. 20:14; Lev. 18:20, 20:10. Under no circumstances was adultery to be engaged in. This information should have stopped David.

But in spite of this information, David sends, takes her, she comes to him, and he lays with her. The surface narration of the act is very short, five *wayyiqtol* verbs in rapid sequence. David sent, David took, she came, David lay, and she returned.

Coming to David

The surface structure of the narrative as a whole clarifies what is involved in Bathsheba's coming to David in verse 4. The close reading of the surface structure makes clear that several people come to David in these two chapters: in verse 6 Joab sent Uriah to David, and Uriah came to David. Verse 22: and the messenger went and he came and make known to David, and in 12:1 YHWH sent Nathan to David, and he came to him. A close reading of the surface structure implies that coming to David on the part of Bathsheba, Uriah, Joab's military messenger, and Nathan are not that these characters are willing participants as such. Coming to David in context is coming in the context of power and authority. Bathsheba comes to David for the same reason that Uriah came—the King has summoned them both. The only willing participant is when David is the subject of the verb came in 2 Sam. 12:24.

The Circumstantial Participle

But between the rapid fire of the verbs in verses 4 and 5, the narrator inserted a circumstantial verbal participial clause, a clause that slows the narrative pace in the midst of the rapid verbs. And David sent messengers and he took her and she came to him and he lay with her and *she was sanctifying herself from her uncleanness* and she returned to her house. This circumstantial participial clause placed here in the context of these other verbs has perplexed interpreters; it does seem out of place. Some focus on the fact that she was purifying herself from her ceremonial impurity after her period was over, and thus underscoring that David is no doubt the father of Bathsheba's baby. But this is the language of ritual and ceremonial sanctification, involving washing with water, and may be what the bathing was about in verse 4. Also, the reflexive participle 'purifying herself' in the context of the five verbs indicates that this sanctifying herself was simultaneous with the actions of the five rapid verbs. This circumstantial clause is placed to make salient that her actions of sanctifying herself from her uncleanness, and engaging in ceremonial washing out of reverence for the presence of God was simultaneous with David actions of sending, taking, and laying. By narrating in this manner, the prophetic narrator construes David actions not only as an abuse of power, but as sacrilege, an impious violation not only of Bathsheba, Uriah, and her family, but as an affront to YHWH himself. This was desecration.

Much more could be said here, but suffice it to say that the narrator's surface structure rhetorical strategy guides the reader along the interpretive path—David alone is guilty. At the end of chapter 11, the narrator stops the action and makes an interpretive judgment about what has occurred so far in the story. "The thing that David did was evil in the sight of the Lord." The narrator's surface structure rhetorical strategy is such that by the time the interpretive judgment is made about David's actions, we agree with the narrative assessment. The narrator's surface structure assessment trumps all other interpretive

considerations. The close reading of the surface structure supports Baldwin's conclusion.

Wrestling with the fact that the prophetic narrator does not deal with Bathsheba's point of view, Baldwin writes:

Every sensitive reader must also wonder what the whole episode looked like from the point of view of Bathsheba. She was the *victim* of David's lust, but the narrator deliberately omits her feeling from consideration, in order to *focus* on David. Nevertheless, she suffered much, losing her integrity, bearing an illegitimate child, losing her husband, marrying her lover and then losing her child. All the ingredients for a drama are here, and invite exploration, but the biblical narrator resisted any invitation to sidetrack. By treating Bathsheba with clinical objectivity, the writer cleverly conveys the self-centeredness of David's lust.¹²

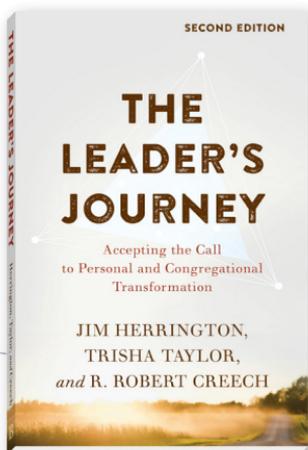
It is precisely the terrible unmitigated reality of David's sin and the enormity of his guilt that makes the grace of God and forgiveness granted to him so underserving and so unexpected. At the same time, over the head of Bathsheba we could put up this inscription written in English, French, and German: #BathshebaToo. In short, it seems that at a minimum some scholars and preachers owe Bathsheba an interpretive and homiletical apology for crucifying her on the cross of incompetent exegesis and inept exposition! Our 21st century #MeToo world requires sensitive theologians, who preach these kinds of texts with exegetical sensitivity, accuracy, grace, and compassion. Otherwise we will continue to be construed as sexist and misogynistic, and in the process, hinder the gospel and misrepresent God's character.

NOTES

1. Genesis of course is the first book of the Torah, and Samuel is one of the Book of the Former Prophets.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 272.

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3. Ibid, 284.
 4. Of course, not all exegetes blame Bathsheba. Ronald Youngblood says that it was the heat that made David susceptible to sexual temptation.
 5. Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King Through Ironic Eyes," *Poetics Today* 7:2 (1986): 288, n. 13
 6. John Calvin, *Sermons of 2 Samuel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Trust, 1992), 481.
 7. J. Vernon McGee, *I and II Samuel: Messages Given on the 5-Year Program of Thru The Bible Radio Network* (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Books, 1976), 220-221.
 8. Joyce G. Baldwin, *1&2 Samuel*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 214.
 9. The term close reading is not original in this research, but its use in Cognitive Hermeneutics is. It is connected with the framework of CG and rooted in a linguistic assumption about language itself. Grammatical and overt realities are all that is there, and they are semantically motivated. Semantics is at the heart of an informed close reading of text in Cognitive Hermeneutics.
 10. I wonder if the gapping strategy of OT narrators may be overstated.
 11. Yee claims that this is just a bare description of the action.
 12. Baldwin, *1&2 Samuel*, 2144

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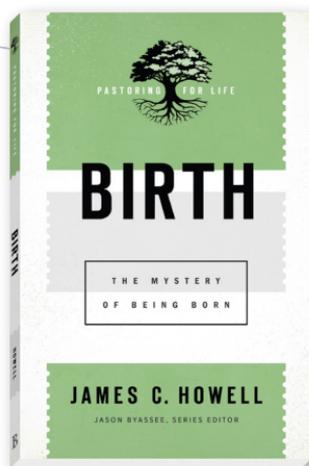


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