

Double Meaning in the Parable of the Poor Man's Ewe (2 Sam 12:1-4)

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In this article I offer a new solution to an age-old interpretive crux: the meaning of the parable of the poor man's ewe (2 Sam 12:1–4) in light of the surrounding narrative of the David and Bathsheba account of 2 Sam 11–12. Ever since the Middle Ages commentators to this passage have noted the apparent incongruity between the elements of the parable on the one hand and the elements of the surrounding narrative on the other.¹ Although some scholars have suggested readings that attempt a close mapping of equivalents between parable and narrative, most opinions have resisted such a close mapping and have opted instead for what I will refer to here as the “conventional approach” to the issue.² In the first part of this study, I review the merits and demerits of that approach. From there I stake out my own interpretation of the issue: namely, that the conventional approach has much merit and cannot be discarded. At the same time, however, I claim that it must be supplemented and that the proper meaning of the parable is best grasped by discerning within it two simultaneous and complementary strands of interpretation.³

¹ See the comments of the fifteenth-century Spanish rabbinic exegete, Don Isaac Abarbanel, *Commentary to the Former Prophets* (Jaffa: Torah Va-Daat, 1955), 344 (Hebrew).

² Some scholars have attempted to identify a more precise mapping but these efforts have not received much enthusiasm. See R. Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: 2 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 123–25, for whom the rich man is none other than God himself. See also D. Daube, “Nathan’s Parable,” *NovT* 24 (1982), 277–88, and the critique in H. S. Pypers, *David as Reader: 2 Samuel 12:1–15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 98–99. Most recently, Jeremy Schipper has ventured an attempt to demonstrate how David may have erroneously mapped the parable onto the account, with Joab featured as the rich man. See J. Schipper, “Did David Overinterpret Nathan’s Parable in 2 Samuel 12:1–6?” *JBL* 126/2 (2007), 383–91.

³ Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH AND ITS LIMITATIONS

At first blush, the correspondence between the parable and the surrounding narrative seems clear: the rich man is David, whose kingly “riches” Nathan details in 12:7–8. The second of the two men in the city is Uriah, who, by contrast, is relatively poor. Uriah has a pet ewe to whom he is greatly attached—presumably a reference to his wife Bathsheba.⁴ Ruthlessly, the rich man steals the poor man’s ewe and slaughters it, a reference to David’s rape of Bathsheba while fully cognizant that she is Uriah’s rightful wife (11:3–4).⁵ While these correspondences seem clear enough, incongruities between the parable and the surrounding narrative have dogged exegetes for centuries:

To begin with, the wayfarer in the parable seems to have no equivalent in the surrounding narrative of David and Bathsheba. Furthermore, the parable maintains that the rich man stole the ewe because he did not wish to suffer a loss from his own flock. In the target narrative, however, David faces no such dilemma. He takes Bathsheba because he desires her, causing loss to Uriah. Yet, David had no alternative course of action that would have caused him loss, had he only been willing to suffer it.

This mapping of equivalents between the parable and the surrounding narrative addresses only one part of the episode. David indeed took Bathsheba unlawfully. The surrounding narrative, however, dedicates even greater attention to David’s second malfeasance—his plot to kill the innocent Uriah. The rape of Bathsheba covers all of four verses (11:1–4).⁶ The plot to kill Uriah and take Bathsheba as wife spans fourteen, vv. 14–27. When the prophet Nathan turns to direct censure of David following the parable his focus is upon this iniquity and not the initial rape of Bath-

⁴ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (4 vols.; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 1:79; Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 123.

⁵ In this study, I employ the term rape as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: “the crime, typically committed by a man, of forcing another person to have sexual intercourse with the offender against their will.” I do so with an eye toward the experience of the character Bathsheba in her encounter with the king. This sense of victimization is an important component of the text, even as the modern application of the word “rape” also inheres juridical implications that may have been foreign to biblical law.

⁶ Although the initial verses of chapter 11 are ambiguous about Bathsheba’s agency in her encounter with David, I maintain that we must conclude that she is an innocent victim. There is no overt censure of Bathsheba anywhere in the narrative. Moreover, she alone from among David’s wives emerges as the mother of the heir to the Davidic dynasty. It would be incongruous for the author to so sternly censure David while so entirely exonerating his mistress for the very same adulterous act. For extensive arguments in this vein, see R. M. Davidson, “Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17/2 (2006), 81–95.

sheba (12:9–10): “Why then have you flouted the command of the Lord and done what displeases him? You have put Uriah the Hittite to the sword; you took his wife and made her your wife and him killed by the sword of the Ammonites . . . because you spurned me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite and making her your wife.” The “taking” of Bathsheba cannot refer to the rape of 11:4. In verse 9, Nathan accuses David with the words *וְאֵת אִשְׁתּוֹ לָקַחְתָּ* *וְאֵת אִשְׁתּוֹ לָקַחְתָּ*, “And his wife, you took for a wife”; and in v. 10 he declares, *וְתִקַּח אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ הַחִתִּי לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לְאִשָּׁה*, “and you took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be for you a wife.” Nathan focuses upon David’s audacity to marry Bathsheba after murdering her husband. Nathan does not address the initial rape, which appears to be the episode mapped out by the parable.⁷

These incongruities between the parable and the surrounding narrative have given rise to somewhat of a consensus in the scholarship. According to this approach, we commit a hermeneutical error if we search too closely for a connection between parable and the surrounding plot. The purpose of the parable is not, in primary fashion, to shed light upon or comment upon David’s various infractions. Rather, the parable is, in the first place, a vehicle used by the prophet Nathan to elicit certain reactions from the errant king.⁸ For instance, Jan Fokkelman claims that the purpose of the parable is to remind David of his good side—his sense of righteousness and pity.⁹ Uriel Simon says that Nathan sought to bring David to confession and penitence.¹⁰ Robert Polzin and Shimon Bar Efrat see the parable as a ruse to trick David into issuing his own sentence.¹¹ Two points are common to all of these versions of the conventional approach. First, all maintain that the case the prophet brings before the king must have verisimilitude and is meant to lead the unsuspecting king to pass judgment on himself. Second, and critically for our purposes, these commentators maintain that the parable must contain “disinformation,” so that the king does not prematurely note the similarity between the offenses in the parable and those he committed himself.¹² The incongruities, therefore, are intentional and necessary. The parable is not entirely

⁷ U. Simon, “The Poor Man’s Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable,” *Bib* 48 (1967), 207–242 (233).

⁸ Many have tried to assess the genre of the parable, identifying it as juridical parable, prophetic parable, or a limited allegory, with affinities to other biblical passages. See the discussion in Schipper, “Did David Overinterpret,” 383–386.

⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, 1:79.

¹⁰ Simon, “The Poor Man’s Ewe-Lamb,” 232.

¹¹ Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 121; S. Bar-Efrat, *Samuel* (2 vols.; Miqra Le-Yisrael/Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 2:118.

¹² Simon, “The Poor Man’s Ewe-Lamb,” 221; Pyper, *David as Reader*, 101. The notion of disinformation at play here was first introduced by the fifteenth-century Spanish rabbinic exegete Don Isaac Abarbanel (see above, note 1).

detached from the cycle of David's misdeeds, but refers to them obliquely. As mentioned, the parable may be read as an allegory of David's adulterous taking of Bathsheba. More generally, it incorporates elements of murder, deprivation and the severance of a loving bond.¹³

I am sympathetic to the conventional approach and find merit in it. I agree that the parable must be read in terms of what Nathan hopes to achieve by its telling. It is imperative that the correlation between the parable and the actual events themselves not be too apparent. Implicit in the conventional approach, however, is a hermeneutical move that goes unstated; namely, that the parable can be read *solely* as a communication between prophet and king. However, at the same time that the prophet addresses the king, there is a second axis of communication at work: that between author and reader. Nathan's parable addresses the king, as the conventional approach emphasizes. Yet, the text of the Book of Samuel simultaneously addresses an audience of readers and of listeners. We must allow for the possibility that there are literary allusions at play in the parable that interact with the surrounding narrative. These are textual elements to which only readers and listeners familiar with the textualized presentation of the episode will be privy.¹⁴ Not so, however, for the character of the king within the story, who does not have access to the author's textualized presentation of the account.

By underestimating or even ignoring this phenomenon, scholars adopting the conventional approach implicitly create an artificial limitation to our understanding of the text. According to this approach, because Nathan's communication with David can only obliquely suggest the latter's own actions it is imperative, therefore, that we forego the search for any close correlation between parable and surrounding narrative. I would maintain that inasmuch as only the reader—and not the literary character, David—is aware of the literary texture of 2 Sam 11, exegetes can well mine the text for allusions between the parable and the surrounding narrative without compromising the need for the parable to be oblique to the king who hears it.

MAPPING OUT THE PARABLE: THREE INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In spite of the incongruities listed earlier the oblique references to the adultery episode of 2 Sam 11:1–4 are still clear: David, the rich man, denies Uriah, the poor man, of his beloved possession, or

¹³ Pyper, *David as Reader*, 100.

¹⁴ On this aspect of the parable, see also E. Eynikel, "The Parable of Nathan (II Sam. 12,1-4) and the Theory of Semiosis," in S. L. McKenzie and T. Römer (eds.), *Rethinking the Foundations: Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible: Essays in Honour of John Van Seters* (BZAW, 294; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 71–90, especially p. 88.

lamb, namely his wife Bathsheba. Some commentators have noted in this regard the consonance between the depiction of the ewe as the poor man's daughter *ויהי לו כבת*, which resonates with the name *בת-שבוע*, "Bathsheba."¹⁵

I would like to exploit the incongruities mentioned earlier to suggest that the parable bears a second *concomitant* equivalence to the narrative of 2 Samuel 11 and offers commentary to it. To appreciate how this works, I offer three initial observations about the narrative before us.

The first concerns the peculiar activity of the rich man in the parable. Note that the rich man does not himself devour the poor man's ewe. In fact, it would appear that the only reason the rich man pilfered and slaughtered the poor man's ewe was to fulfill the cultural obligation of providing for a wayfarer that had suddenly appeared at his doorstep. Had the wayfarer not come his way, perhaps he may have never stolen the ewe at all. Put differently, the figure of the rich man presents us with a complex character. On the one hand he is pitiless and steals his neighbor's beloved possession. Yet, he does so not to satisfy his own appetite but in order to perform a good deed—to provide for a traveler passing through. Let the complexity be fully clear: it is not, simply, that sometimes the rich man does terrible things and at other times good things. The rich man confronts us with a figure which, when seeking to fulfill a cultural obligation—providing for the wayfarer—perpetrates a heinous crime, stealing and slaughtering his neighbor's beloved ewe. Even as his behavior seems bizarre, we reserve judgment and will take it as a clue of what we are to look for in the narrative of 2 Sam 11.

My second observation concerns the multiple stages of crisis that Bathsheba endures throughout the ordeal. To properly construe the parable and the way it maps onto the narrative of 2 Sam 11, we need to appreciate the different identities that Bathsheba assumes as events swiftly carry her from crisis to crisis. At the outset of the narrative she is, simply, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. The first shift in identity occurs in verse 11:4, where she becomes the victim of a sexual assault, violated as a woman, and perhaps on an additional level, as a married woman. This identity intensifies in v. 5, when she discovers that she is pregnant. She will never be able to put the traumatic event behind her, and the seed that she carries will potentially be a living reminder to her for the rest of her life of the trauma that she endured.

The pregnancy, however, foists upon her a new and even more foreboding identity: the stigma of a woman who will be suspected of adultery. There is no indication in the text of 2 Samuel 11 that Bathsheba shared her ordeal with anyone. It would seem that after returning home (v. 4), she kept the issue quiet. As readers, we

¹⁵ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, 79.

are beckoned to explain this silence in the text.¹⁶ She presumably hoped that the ordeal would be behind her, and that she would continue on in her life, keeping the ordeal a secret to herself. Indeed, she had little other choice. She could hardly accuse the king of the crimes he actually committed with no evidence to substantiate her claim. At best, she would have been dismissed as a liar, or as delusional. At worst, she risked incurring the wrath of a court potentially eager to silence her. One passage of Deuteronomy, 22:24, expects a betrothed woman in an urban setting to scream if attacked. Bathsheba cannot even claim that she was raped by a stranger, for no one heard her screams. Once she discovers her pregnancy, she is despondent as she has no credible explanation for the pregnancy. The pregnancy, then, dooms Bathsheba to bear the stigma of a woman who betrayed her husband, precisely when he was serving valiantly on the front lines of battle. As Yehuda Keel notes, her situation is analogous to that of Tamar in Gen 38. Tamar was to have been married to Shelah. When her pregnancy is discovered Judah orders for her to be burnt at the stake, as the pregnancy represented *prima facie* evidence that she had committed adultery (Gen 38:24).¹⁷ Tamar is exonerated only because of the material evidence she possesses incriminating Judah as the father (38:25). Bathsheba possesses no such evidence to incriminate the king. Desperate, she discreetly turns to David, informing him of the pregnancy (11:5). Surely she had some reason for doing so, yet the text here is silent. The gap is well explained if we understand the message as an implicit plea for protection. This was the understanding of the eleventh century French rabbinic exegete R. Joseph Kara: “*I am with child*—She intimated to him her desire: ‘Save me from this shame! Recall my husband from the battlefield that he may lie with me and let the unborn child be attributed to him’.”¹⁸

While the narrative of 2 Sam 11 records the extraordinary measures David took to get Uriah to visit his home, it is nowhere suggested that Bathsheba was aware of any of this. Put differently, her missive to the king, “I am pregnant” (v. 5) is met, from her perspective, with a response of deafening silence. As the days of royal silence pass, her despair can only grow; as her pregnancy progresses, her only hope is that her husband will return home from the front in a timely fashion. Then, suddenly, the worst of all hap-

¹⁶ As several commentators have noted, the text of 2 Sam 11 is fraught with gaps, particularly concerning the motivations of the *dramatis personae*. Perforce, readers are obliged to impose coordinates of meaning that explain the actions taken by these literary characters. See A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC, 11; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 155; A. Campbell, *2 Samuel* (FOTL, 8; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 115.

¹⁷ Y. Keel, *Samuel* (2 vols.; Da’at Miqra; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981), 2:415 (Hebrew).

¹⁸ The glosses of R. Joseph Kara to the Book of Samuel are found in all editions of the *Miqra’ot Gedolot* anthology of medieval rabbinic commentaries to this book. Translation is my own.

pens: she learns that he has fallen in action (11:26). The mourning that she expresses in 11:26 can be understood as being for two people: for her deceased husband, as the text of v. 26 expressly states, but also in a way for herself as well. With her husband never to return and the king apparently deaf to her message, it will now only be a matter of time before her pregnancy is discovered. At best she will have to bear the stigma of an unexplained pregnancy. If the Tamar episode is any barometer, she could even face death. In the final twist of fate, precisely when all seemed lost, the king sends for her and takes her in marriage, redeeming her from all repercussion (11:27). Bathsheba occupies more roles than any other figure in the story: she is wife, rape victim, fugitive, and finally wife again.

Finally, I would like to clarify what is at stake for the king when he learns of Bathsheba's pregnancy. With nearly one voice, exegetes have assumed that David now fears that he will be incriminated. He therefore seeks a cover for Bathsheba's pregnancy so that accusing fingers will not be directed at him. The text nowhere says this explicitly. This is yet another gap in the story that readers must fill in order to make sense of the story. Yet, while this thesis is plausible it is also problematic. David's behavior in the opening verses of the chapter is cavalier and reveals no concern to satisfy his lusts in full secrecy. A small handful of people know about David's malfeasance. In v. 3 he sends an emissary to inquire about the identity of the beautiful woman. In v. 4 messengers (in the plural!) are sent to fetch her. David seems to make no efforts to ensure their silence. To be sure, David does not want it to be known that he has slept with Uriah's wife. It would seem, though, that he has no concerns of the issue being leaked because his men are loyal to him.

Bathsheba's pregnancy does little to raise the stakes for the king. The men who are in the know had knowledge of the affair even before Bathsheba becomes pregnant. If his men are loyal to him and were even complicit in his act adultery, why would they turn on him when his mistress became pregnant? The only potential way for Bathsheba's pregnancy to create a liability for David would be if she were to speak up. Yet as we already noted, if she were she to do so there would be no compelling reason for her to be believed. In Gen 38, it seems that Tamar would not have been believed on the basis of her word alone without the incriminating evidence. The very fact that Bathsheba sends a discreet message to David suggests that she herself realizes that going public will not serve her interest. David here emerges as a man of power who has engaged in a sexual escapade with a woman only to impregnate her. Upon receiving the missive, "I am with child," David could have simply ignored her plea and shrugged it off as "her problem," and left it at that. In such circumstances the burden of proof falls upon the woman to substantiate her claim.

Instead, I would propose an alternative motive for David's actions. It is not David who is imperiled by the pregnancy, but Bathsheba. She knows this and appeals to him. As R. Joseph Kara writes in his comments to v. 8, David instructs Uriah to return home to his wife, so as to save Bathsheba from her predicament. David could have done the truly righteous thing in this circumstance and confess his guilt. This, however, would have cost him a dear price in terms of his public stature, a price the narrative implies he was apparently unwilling to pay. At the same time, David feels compelled to save Bathsheba from the predicament of his own making, and grants her the protection that she seeks. His ruse to get Uriah home would have served David well. When that fails, however, we discover a shocking move: all-consumed by his sense of responsibility for Bathsheba's welfare, David perpetrates a dastardly deed in its service. He arranges Uriah's death so that he can marry her and thereby save her from the stigma of an accused adulteress, and possibly even from death at the stake.

NATHAN'S PARABLE: A NEW MAPPING

With these understandings I return to the parable of the poor man's ewe. A wayfarer appears at the rich man's doorstep seeking shelter. Filled with a sense of his responsibility, the rich man seeks to provide his guest his needs. Yet rather than parting with a lamb from his own flock the rich man performs a ruthless deed, stealing his neighbor's beloved ewe and slaughtering it for the sake of the guest, who is, apparently, oblivious to the criminal acts perpetrated by the rich man on his behalf. The mapping of the parable upon the narrative of 2 Sam 11 is clear: The wayfarer who appears at the rich man's doorstep is Bathsheba seeking protection from David upon learning of her pregnancy. The rich man wishes to provide for his guest, even as David wishes to do the right thing and assume responsibility for Bathsheba's welfare. The rich man could have taken from his own flock but instead performed the cruel deed of stealing his neighbor's ewe and slaughtering it for the sake of the wayfarer. Similarly, David could have protected Bathsheba by paying a price himself and confessing his infractions.¹⁹ David, though, was unprepared to pay a price in his stature as king and

¹⁹ Note that it is not obvious, (as per Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 123) that the rich man's "abundant flocks and herds" (12:1) refer to David's numerous wives. Rather, from Nathan's explanation of the parable in 12:7–8, it would appear that the rich man's (i.e., David's) riches are the totality of his kingdom: "That man (i.e., the rich man) is you! Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: It was I who anointed you king over Israel and it was I who rescued you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master's house and possession of your master's wives; and I gave you the House of Israel and Judah; and if that were not enough, I would give you twice as much more" (my translation here follows NJPS).

instead does a dastardly deed in the service of a warped sense of responsibility to Bathsheba: he slaughters Uriah.

The equivalence between the wayfarer seeking shelter and Bathsheba seeking protection appears not only on the level of motif, but on the lexical plane as well. Note the prevalence of the root **ב.ו.א.** in the description of the wayfarer (11:4):

**וּבָא הַלֵּךְ לְאִישׁ הָעֶשִׂיר וַיַּחְמַל לִקְחַת מִצֹּאֲנוֹ וּמִבְקָרוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת לְאָרֶחַ
הַבָּא לוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת כִּבְשַׁת הָאִישׁ הָרֵאשִׁי וַיַּעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ הַבָּא אֵלָיו**

A wayfarer came to the rich man, but he was loath to take from his sheep or from his cattle to provide for the guest who had come to him, and so he took the poor man's ewe, and dressed it for the man who had come to him.

This is significant, because in the narrative of chapter 11, Bathsheba “comes to” the “rich man,” namely, David (11:4): “She came to him (וּתְבֵא אֵלָיו) and he lay with her,” thus establishing a lexical equivalence between the wayfarer and Bathsheba.

Within this mapping, Uriah emerges as the slaughtered ewe of the parable.²⁰ Although the ewe is feminine and Uriah a man, the text establishes an unmistakable lexical equivalence between them. Nathan claims that the ewe would “eat of his bread, drink of his cup and lay in his bosom (וּבְחִיקוֹ תִשְׁכַּב, וּמִפְתּוֹ תֹאכַל וּמִכֶּסוֹ תִשְׁתֶּה, וּבְחִיקוֹ תִשְׁכַּב).” These three actions of the ewe—eating, drinking, and laying intimately—are precisely those ascribed by the author to Uriah and his married life in chapter 11. Although Uriah presently refuses to visit his home, he describes what would normally go on at home in a language using these very same terms, as the formulation of v. 11 shows: “How can I go home and eat, and drink, and lay with my wife?” (וַאֲנִי אָבוֹא אֶל בֵּיתִי לֹאכַל וּלְשִׁתּוֹת וּלְשַׁכַּב עִם אִשְׁתִּי). This triad of terms appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, and suggests an intentional mapping between Uriah and the ewe.²¹

We have established, therefore, a new line of equivalences: the rich man is David. The wayfarer is Bathsheba. The ewe slaughtered for the sake of the unwitting wayfarer is Uriah, who is slaughtered by David for the sake of Bathsheba, yet unbeknownst to her. Who, then, is the poor man? We already saw that 2 Sam 12:3 informs us

²⁰ Along a different set of equivalences, other scholars have also understood the ewe to be Uriah, in spite of the gender distinction between the feminine ewe and the warrior male, Uriah. See P. Chibaudel, “David et Bethsabée: Une tragédie de l’abstention,” *VSpir* 143 (1989), 75–85 (79); L. Delekat, “Tendenz und Theologie der David-Salomo-Erzählung,” in *Das Ferne und nahe Wort: Festschrift Leonhard Rost zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres am 30. November 1966* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967), 33; J. W. Wesselius, “Joab’s Death and the Central Theme of the Succession Narrative (2 Samuel 9–Kings 20),” *VT* 40 (1990), 336–51 (346–47 n. 15).

²¹ P. Coxon, “A Note on Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12, 1–6,” *Bib* 62 (1981), 249; Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 123. Cf. Schipper, “Did David Overinterpret,” 388 n. 24.

that the ewe would lie in the poor man's bosom. That would suggest that the "ewe" in the narrative—Uriah—lays in the bosom of the equivalent to the poor man, namely Bathsheba.²² But is not Bathsheba already assigned a role within this new mapping as the wayfarer?

I would claim that the lexical equivalence that establishes an identity between Bathsheba and the poor man is on the mark. Bathsheba can inhabit two roles in the parable because the ordeal she suffers transports her through multiple identities across the story. The full equivalence may be expressed thus:

Rich Man = David

Poor Man = Bathsheba as Uriah's wife

Wayfarer = Bathsheba seeking shelter from David

Poor Man's Ewe = Uriah, husband of Bathsheba

At the outset of the narrative, Bathsheba inhabits but a single role: she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite (11:3). Yet in the continuation of the story her primary interaction is with David, to whom she urgently turns, seeking protection.

TWO SINS, TWO EQUIVALENT MAPPINGS, TWO PROPHETIC CENSURES

Even as I propose a new mapping of the equivalences between the parable of chapter 12 and the narrative of chapter 11, I am at pains to underscore that I do not deny the correspondence proposed by the conventional approach, namely that the rich man is David, the poor man, Uriah and the ewe, Bathsheba. Rather, these two mappings complement each other. In this section, I demonstrate that these two mappings correspond to the two sins that David committed. I demonstrate as well that the dual nature of David's sin and the double meaning of the parable are clearly evident in the content and structure of Nathan's double censure in 12:9–12.

David committed two sins. The first is that of adultery, as reported in 11:4. This sin gains expression in the correspondence as classically understood by the conventional approach:

The Parable of Adulterous Rape

Rich Man = David

Poor Man = Uriah

Ewe = Bathsheba

Within this mapping, the focus is entirely on David's adulterous taking of Bathsheba. David—the rich man—took advantage of the

²² Along a different set of equivalences, this suggestion is already raised by Schipper, "Did David Overinterpret," 388.

fact that Uriah was a subordinate to him and was also far away from home, and slept with his wife. Yet, as pointed out, many incongruities remain when this is the sole axis of explanation. This created the opening for us to seek a second axis of interpretation, one that we may now see refers to David's second sin, the murder of Uriah:

The Parable of Murder

Rich Man = David

Poor Man = Bathsheba as Uriah's wife

Wayfarer = Bathsheba seeking shelter from David

Poor Man's Ewe = Uriah, husband of Bathsheba, who is slaughtered for her sake

Notice that this second axis of interpretation is the more complete one. It accounts for all four figures in the parable—rich man, poor man, wayfarer and ewe, whereas the first axis of interpretation, that which sees Nathan's parable as a parable for adulterous rape accounts for three of the characters, the rich man, the poor man and the ewe, but not the wayfarer. I would suggest that this resonates with the relative weight given each sin in the narrative of chapter 11. As already noted, David's adulterous taking of Bathsheba, while vividly portrayed, takes up verses 1–4 only. By contrast, David's efforts to have Uriah killed so that he could marry Bathsheba occupy 14 verses, vv. 14–27.

A careful examination of Nathan's censure in vv. 9–12 likewise reveals that there are two meanings to the parable and that they correspond to David's two sins. An understanding of a biblical convention is helpful here. In several other biblical passages a prophet issues a parable and then upon concluding the parable, immediately addresses the target audience, opening with the introduction, כה אמר יהוה, "Thus says the Lord." The formulaic introduction always represents the crossover from the parable to its mapping and the subsequent oratory points the target audience to the proper understanding of the parable (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 20:42; Jer 13:9; Ezek 24:6). What is curious about Nathan's censure is that the introductory formula of "thus says the Lord" appears twice—once in v. 9, and then again in v.11. *A priori*, it would seem that Nathan's censure is of one cloth, and represents a continuous oratory. I would suggest, however, that Nathan punctuates his censure with two introductory calls, because he offers two mappings of the parable for David to consider. Note that following David's outburst in v. 6, the prophet does not immediately declare, "thus says the Lord." Rather, the prophet first indicts David, proclaiming, "You are the man!" Only once Nathan has established David's identity as the rich man of the parable, does he then declare—twice—"thus says the Lord." I would suggest that Nathan splits his oratory into

two, because he wishes to draw David's attention to two separate axes of interpretation of the parable. He wishes for David to ponder the full range of his activity as the 'rich man' of the parable, both as adulterer and as murderer.

This clearly emerges through a close reading of v. 9–12. In v. 9, the prophet opens his charge sheet: "You have put Uriah the Hittite to the sword; you took his wife and made her your wife and him killed by the sword of the Ammonite. And now, the sword shall not desist from your house, because you spurned me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite and making her your wife." Notice that there is no mention here of the rape episode of 11:4. As mentioned earlier, the syntax surrounding the verb *.n.q.ʔ* can imply only "taking" in the sense of marriage, and refers only to the taking of Bathsheba in marriage following Uriah's death in 11:27. The subject of the prophet's censure matches the axis of interpretation that I referred to earlier as the "Parable of Murder." The rich man (David) slaughters the ewe (Uriah) of the poor man (his spouse, Bathsheba), so that he may provide for her, by covering for her pregnancy through marriage, even as the rich man slaughtered the ewe to provide for the wayfarer. The rich man refused to part with a lamb from his own flock (his "riches"), even as David refused to confess his guilt and suffer the consequences to his kingship, the "riches" that Nathan delineates in vv. 7–8.

Verse 12:11, however, also begins with "thus says the Lord," and seems to continue in its censure of David. But a careful reading reveals that the prophet's ire now attends to a different topic (12:11–12): "Thus said the Lord: I will make a calamity rise against you from within your own house; I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun. You acted in secret, but I will make this happen in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight." What David did "in secret" was that he slept with another man's wife, a reference to the events of 11:1–4. The punishment—measure for measure—is that David's own wives will be raped by another man. Note that within this censure there is no mention of the killing of Uriah and no mention of David's taking Bathsheba for a wife after murdering her husband. The censure fully explains the parable according to the first axis of interpretation, that understood classically by the conventional approach, and what I call here the parable of adulterous rape: David (the rich man) took the beloved ewe (Bathsheba) from the poor man (Uriah), and raped her.

A curious facet of the prophet's double censure is the order in which he presents the two mappings. To read the narrative of 2 Sam 11 is to be struck by the sequence of events, of how David cascades from one depth to yet a deeper one. The chronology of events is crucial to understanding how David stooped so low. One might have expected, therefore, that the prophet's censure would adhere to chronological order. That is, first he would charge David with adultery, and then follow up with the charge of murder for the

sake of marrying the victim's wife. Yet, Nathan inverses the order and charges David first with the murder of Uriah and only then with the adulterous taking of Bathsheba.

I would suggest that Nathan does this because the murder of Uriah bears subtleties that require elucidation and emphasis. Note that the prophet is emphatic that the infraction here was not only the murder of Uriah, but the taking of Bathsheba as wife as well. Yet, why should the taking of Bathsheba as wife constitute a defamation of the Lord? After all, Uriah was now dead, and the marriage lawful. Moreover, by doing so, was not David acting mercifully, now saving the pregnant Bathsheba from the stigma of bearing an illegitimate child, and perhaps even from death on account of adultery? David himself may have rationalized things thus. Certainly, Israelites aware of the new marriage would have applauded the king's move, a seeming act of grace toward the widow of a fallen war-hero. Yet, precisely because the marriage was technically lawful, and because from an ethical side there is merit to David's sense of responsibility to provide for Bathsheba's welfare, the prophet needs to rip the mask off of David's actions and reveal the atrocity for what it is. When an innocent man is murdered, the heinous nature of the crime cancels out any residual good that may come of it. The ends can never justify the means.

THE TIMING OF NATHAN'S CENSURE

At what point in the narrative does the prophet Nathan confront David with the parable and its attendant censure? The issue receives scant attention in most contemporary discussion, yet I would claim that a clear understanding of this issue is critical for a full understanding of the parable's force. Let us consider the possibility that the prophet confronts the king immediately following the series of wrongdoings; that is, following the death of Uriah, and the taking of Bathsheba for a wife. A close reading of 2 Sam 11:27–12:1 suggests otherwise:

After the period of mourning was over, David sent and had her brought into his palace; she became his wife and *she bore him a son*. But the Lord was displeased with what David had done, and the Lord sent Nathan to David . . .

The narrative suggests that Nathan came to the king not immediately after his marriage to Bathsheba, but only some seven, or eight months later, once the child was born. Some might aver that we have here a telescoping of time: that the narrative of chapter 11 rounds off the issues raised in that story—namely the issue of Bathsheba's pregnancy, by noting the child's birth, but that, in fact, Nathan approached the king at an earlier time, much closer to the time of the infractions themselves.

The narrative that concludes Nathan's censure, however, suggests otherwise (12:14–15): "Since you have spurned the enemies of the Lord by this deed, the child that has been born to you shall

die. Nathan went home, and the Lord afflicted the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David." The censure, then, follows the birth of the child.²³ Yet, why would the prophet tarry in his censure until the birth of the child? Scripture relates no action to David during this time and, seemingly, the rebuke would have been most apt in the immediate aftermath of David's wrongdoing. One could posit that the prophet wished to grant David a grace period in which to "come clean," as it were. With no penitential overtures taken by the king, the prophet acts. Yet, it can be no coincidence that the prophet times his censure to coincide with the arrival of the child. We may speculate that the child's birth represented a moment of closure for David on the entire episode. Surely, David was aware that he had sinned. One can well imagine David adopting a mental or spiritual posture during this time reminiscent of Adam in the garden of Eden following the sin, just waiting for the proverbial shoe to fall. The arrival of a healthy child, then, would signal to David that indeed the Lord had granted him clemency and that the episode was behind him.

We may also speculate that in going to extraordinary measures to save Bathsheba David was also, concomitantly, acting out of an additional impulse: to save the life of his own child. With Uriah dead, David was able to marry Bathsheba and achieve his goal vis-à-vis her. His goal of saving his own progeny however, would remain unfulfilled. With its arrival, healthy and sound, David had now completed his second goal. One may infer this from Nathan's censure in 12:14–15. The child is stricken because David had Uriah killed, in part, to save the life of the child—*his* child. Note, in this regard, that the prophet refers twice to the child as David's child: "the child that has been born *to you*" (v. 14); "the Lord smote the child that Uriah's wife had borne *to David*" (v. 15).

With a newfound appreciation for the timing of Nathan's parable and censure, we may reflect anew on the equivalences implied

²³ The key phrase in 12:14 is הַבֵּן הַיְלוּד לְךָ, which is translated in *Tg. Ps-J*, LXX, and in nearly all modern English commentaries as "the son *that is born* to you," that is, as a phrase that does not suggest a definitive temporal orientation either of a birth that has occurred, or of a birth still yet to occur. Some modern renderings of the phrase read "the child who *will be born* to you" (NJPS; Andersen, *2 Samuel*, 158). I have followed here, however, the reading of the medieval exegetes Qimhi and Abarbanel, who render הַבֵּן הַיְלוּד לְךָ in v. 14 as "the child *who has been born* to you." This reading is also adopted by Bar-Efrat, *Samuel*, 2:115, as well as by P. K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (AncBib, 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 293. Verse 15 clearly suggests a single time-frame for Nathan's return home and for the smiting of the child by the Lord. Had the child not been born yet, we would expect the narrative to state that Nathan returned home, that Bathsheba gave birth, and that the Lord smote the child. Taken together, the evidence from 11:27, announcing the birth, and from 12:15, relegating all of the action to a single time-frame, all support the understanding that Nathan confronted the king only after the birth of the child.

between the parable and the surrounding narrative. Accepting the possibility that David strove to save both Bathsheba and, by extension, his own child from death, I suggest an additional, complementary, mapping of what I have called the parable of murder, with a new understanding of the identity of the wayfarer:

Rich Man = David

Poor Man = Bathsheba

Wayfarer = David's unborn child

Poor Man's Ewe = Uriah, husband of Bathsheba

Within these coordinates, each character in the parable is equivalent to a separate and distinct character in the surrounding narrative. Bathsheba here occupies the role of the poor man alone, while the attention now focuses upon the unborn child for whom David seeks to provide shelter, even as the rich man in the parable strove to provide the wayfarer seeking shelter. The image of a wayfarer is an apt one to portray the unborn child destined to perish soon after birth. A wayfarer, by definition, is one who arrives on the scene, but quickly departs. By depicting the newborn child to David as but a wayfarer, Nathan wished to suggest to David that the child would be but a temporary presence in his life.²⁴

I earlier suggested, contrary to the conventional approach, that the effort to seek out close correspondences between the parable and the narrative was justified, as the parable is a communication not only between prophet and king, but between author and reader as well. This effort may be justified as well from an additional standpoint. The conventional approach is indeed correct that as David heard the parable it was imperative that the references to his own misdeeds remain opaque. Yet with the denouement and the unmasking of the rich man as none other than David himself the parable takes on a new role. The parable now serves as a tool through which David may reflect on the various aspects of his nefarious behavior. It allows him to consider the various characters in the parable and how they might correspond to the people whose lives he so deeply affected through his wrongdoing. David strikes an undeniably penitent pose throughout chapter 12. Do we see, however, an indication that David has reflected upon, not only the censure of vv. 7–12, but upon the parable of vv. 1–4?

Perhaps we do. As he rises from mourning, David states (12:23), “I *am going toward him* (אני הלך אליו), but he will not return to me.” He does not use the language of “going down” to the child (cf. Gen 37:35). The language of “going” (הלך) as a reference to moving from this world to the next in death and life, matches the use of the term הלך—wayfarer—to describe the fetus, one who is

²⁴ My thanks to my student Yaron Za'ir for suggesting this interpretation.

as of yet unborn, but on his way to this life. It is difficult to say for certain that the language of going (הלך) from life to death in David's reflection of 12:23 is a deliberate allusion to the language of going (הלך) used to describe the wayfarer, who may be a figure for the unborn child. What should be clear, though, is that once Nathan reveals to David that he is the rich man, the dynamics of the relationship between the parable and the episodes of David's malfeasance are reversed. As Nathan related the parable to the king, its connection to David's misdeeds needed to remain opaque. Once Nathan reveals to David that he is the rich man, it becomes incumbent upon the king to probe its complexity and appreciate its multi-faceted comment on his behavior.

CONCLUSION

Some expositors who adopt the conventional approach are strident in condemning attempts to map the equivalences between the parable and the narrative. Jan Fokkelman writes, "because a parable is not a comparison, we need not look fanatically for a counterpart in David's reality to each of its elements."²⁵ David Daube describes the search for a close connection between the parable and the account as "pedantic."²⁶ In this study, I have endeavored to show that the elements of the parable have been carefully crafted and are well integrated into the text of 2 Sam 11–12. The conventional approach still retains much that is worthy. It correctly identifies one axis of equivalence, that which I have called the parable of adulterous rape. It is correct, moreover, to insist that the parable remain opaque for David must hear it without suspecting that it is a commentary on his actions. The "disinformation," by my reading, does not stem from the inclusion of details that are random and irrelevant to David's actions, as claimed by the conventional approach. Rather the parable remains opaque at the moment of telling precisely because of its complexity and because it can only be understood fully by mapping it out twice.

While this reading highlights the integral nature of these two chapters, it also highlights commentary to the story of David's wrongdoings that would perhaps go underappreciated. The conventional approach maintains that the purpose of the parable is to elicit indignation from the king. Yet surely, if this were the only aim the author could have crafted a simpler story, without the wayfarer, in which the rich man merely consumed the ewe to satisfy his own appetite. The conventional approach offers no satisfying explanation as to why the rich man emerges as a complex figure—as one who seeks to do good, but out of a warped sense of responsibility winds up committing an invidious injustice. By appreciating the

²⁵ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, 1:78. Cf. similar comments in J. Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 299, and in Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb," 223.

²⁶ Daube, "Nathan's Parable," 275.

complexity of the rich man's behavior and "pedantically" searching for a parallel in the surrounding narrative, we learn not only to identify the equivalence in the character of David. We also come to an appreciation of the complex motivations that lead to the murder of Uriah, of how the reactions of guilt and responsibility—appropriate in proper measure—can assume such overwhelming proportions that they themselves become the agents of destruction.