

## An Old Testament KnoWhy<sup>[1]</sup>

relating to the reading assignment for

**Gospel Doctrine Lesson 24: “Create in Me a Clean Heart”**

**(2 Samuel 11-12; Psalm 51) (JBOTL24B)**



Figure 6. Angelika Kaufmann: “Thou art the man!”

## The Know



Figure 7. Pieter Pietersz Lastman: King David Handing the Letter to Uriah, 1611

## Commentary on 2 Samuel 11-12

### Chapter 11 (continued from the previous article in this series— JBOTL24A: David and Bathsheba, Part 1 of 2

**14 ¶ And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent [it] by the hand of Uriah.**

*sent [it] by the hand of Uriah.* “The letter would be in the form of a small scroll with either a seal or threads around it. David is counting on the fact that Uriah as a loyal soldier will not dream of opening the letter. If he does not know of the adultery, he has in any case no personal motive to look at the letter. If he does know, he is accepting his fate with grim resignation, bitterly conscious that his [David] has betrayed him and that the king is too powerful for him to contend with.”<sup>[2]</sup>

**15 And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.**

*that he may be smitten and die.* “With no possibility of making Uriah seem responsible for Bathsheba’s pregnancy, David compounds the original crime of adultery by plotting to get Uriah out of the way entirely by having him killed. What follows in the story makes it clear that bloodshed, far more than adultery, is David’s indelible transgression.”<sup>[3]</sup>

“David appears without sympathy, vicious and vengeful. Uriah has thwarted his attempts to protect Bathsheba and himself, and Uriah must pay.”<sup>[4]</sup>

**16 And it came to pass, when Joab observed the city, that he assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men [were].**

*Joab... assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men [were].* This phrase indirectly attests to Joab's assessment of Uriah's faithfulness and courage.

**17 And the men of the city went out, and fought with Joab: and there fell [some] of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also.**

*fought with Joab.* “Here ‘Joab’ must mean ‘some of Joab’s men.’”<sup>[5]</sup> Joab was no fool and would not have “put himself in the same death trap that he put Uriah in.”<sup>[6]</sup>

*There fell [some] of the people of the servants of David.* “[O]ne of the salient features of this story is the repeated alteration of instructions by those who carry them out. It is, indeed, a vivid demonstration of the ambiguous effecting of ends through the agency of others which is one of the great political themes of the story. The canny Joab immediately sees that David’s orders are impossibly clumsy (perhaps an indication that the Machiavellian David has suddenly lost his manipulative coolness): if the men around Uriah were to draw back all at once, leaving him alone exposed, it would be entirely transparent that there was a plot to get him killed. Joab, then, coldly recognizes that in order to give David’s plan some credibility, it will be necessary to send a whole contingent into a dangerous place and for many others beside Uriah to die. In this fashion, the circle of lethal consequences of David’s initial act spreads wider and wider.”<sup>[7]</sup> “If David won’t look out for Joab, Joab will look out for himself. ... Joab, unlike Uriah, acts as an accomplice.”<sup>[8]</sup>

**18 Then Joab sent and told David all the things concerning the war;**

**19 And charged the messenger, saying, When thou hast made an end of telling the matters of the war unto the king,**

*And charged the messenger.* “Why does Joab instruct the messenger so elaborately in verse 20 and 21? What is he up to? Joab is likely angry at David for having put him in an awkward position. His instructions to the messenger seem calculated to put David in his place. Joab’s apparently stupid move is really David’s fault, but Joab wants David first to condemn it before he lets the responsibility be known. This foreshadows Nathan’s parable in chapter 12. Nathan, too, relates an incident calculated to arouse David’s wrath without letting David know that he himself is the one to be condemned.”<sup>[9]</sup>

**20 And if so be that the king’s wrath arise, and he say unto thee, Wherefore approached ye so nigh unto the city when ye did fight? knew ye not that they would shoot from the wall?**

**21 Who smote Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? did not a woman cast a piece of a millstone upon him from the wall, that he died in Thebez? why went ye nigh the wall? then say thou, Thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.**

*did not a woman cast a piece of millstone upon him from the wall.* “The story of the ignominious death of Abimelech at the hand of a woman<sup>[10]</sup> may have become a kind of object lesson in siege strategy for professional soldiers—when you are laying siege against a city, above all beware of coming too close to the wall. One suspects also that Joab’s emphasis on a woman’s dealing death to the warrior—Abimelech had asked his armor bearer to run him through so that it would *not* be said he was killed by a woman!—points back to Bathsheba as the ultimate source of this chain of disasters.”<sup>[11]</sup>

*Thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.* “Joab obviously knows that this is the message for which David is waiting. By placing it in the anticipatory ‘script’ that he dictates to the messenger, he is of course giving away the secret, more or less, to the messenger. Might this, too, be calculated, as an oblique dissemination of David’s complicity in Uriah’s death, perhaps to be used at some future point by Joab against the king? In any case, given David’s track record in killing messengers who bear tidings not to his liking,<sup>[12]</sup> Joab may want to be sure that this messenger has the means to fend off any violent reaction from the king, who would not have been expecting a report of many casualties.”<sup>[13]</sup>

**22 So the messenger went, and came and shewed David all that Joab had sent him for.**

**23 And the messenger said unto David, Surely the men prevailed against us, and came out unto us into the field, and we were upon them even unto the entering of the gate.**

*and we were upon them even unto the entering of the gate.* “The astute messenger offers a circumstantial account that justifies the mistake of approaching too close to the wall: the Ammonites came out after the Israelites in hot pursuit; then the Israelites, turning the tide of battle, were drawn after the fleeing Ammonites and so were tricked into coming right up to the gates of the city.”<sup>[14]</sup>

**24 And the shooters shot from off the wall upon thy servants; and [some] of the king’s servants be dead, and thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.**

*And thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.* “The messenger has divined the real point of Joab’s instructions all too well. He realizes that what David above all wants to hear is the news of Uriah’s death, and rather than risk the whole outburst, indicated by the prospective dialogue invented by Joab with the reference to the woman who killed Abimelech, the messenger hastens to conclude his report, before the king can react, by mentioning Uriah’s death. Thus the narrative makes palpable the inexorable public knowledge of David’s crime.”<sup>[15]</sup>

“[Although it] appears from the King James Version that the messenger isn’t crafty enough to wait for David’s response before telling him of Uriah’s death, ... in other versions, the *New English Bible* and the *Jerusalem Bible*, for example, the servant does wait, and David repeats the anticipated questions before hearing that Uriah is dead. The effect is to emphasize David’s gullibility and Joab’s ability to manipulate him.”<sup>[16]</sup>

**25 Then David said unto the messenger, Thus shalt thou say unto Joab, Let not this thing displease thee, for the sword devoureth one as well as another: make thy battle more strong against the city, and overthrow it: and encourage thou him.**

*the sword devoureth one as well as another.* The literal Hebrew term used here for ‘devoureth’ is ‘eats,’ recalling again a key leading word in this account [3, p. 202]. “The king responds by directing to Joab what sounds like an old soldier’s cliché (on the order of ‘every bullet has its billet’). These vapid words of consolation to the field commander are an implicit admission that Joab’s revision of David’s orders was necessary: David concedes that many a good man had to die in order to cover up his murder by proxy of Uriah.”<sup>[17]</sup>

*encourage thou him.* “[David] may have felt uneasy about having put Joab in such a bad position, not because of any moral qualms, but because Joab was a person to be reckoned with—he was in charge of the army... David plays the magnanimous monarch, treating Joab as a well-meaning but blundering child in need of encouragement. His condescending attitude may have been calculated to arouse Joab’s wrath, in return for Joab’s design to arouse his.”<sup>[18]</sup>



Figure 8. James Tissot: Bathsheba mourns for her husband Uriah

**26 And when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband.**

*the wife of Uriah.* “She is not called ‘Bat-Sheva’ again until David’s crime has been punished by the death of their child.”<sup>[19]</sup>

*she mourned for her husband.* “Does Bathsheba really mourn for her husband, or is the mourning merely perfunctory? There is no indication in the narrative of how she felt toward Uriah, or toward David, for that matter. Perhaps in her situation, affection was only a secondary consideration.”<sup>[20]</sup>

**27 And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.**

*when the mourning was past.* “Normally, the mourning period would be seven days. ... She does, of course, want to become David’s wife before her [condition] shows.”<sup>[21]</sup>

*David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son.* “Throughout this story, David is never seen anywhere but in his house. This sentence at the end strongly echoes verse 4: ‘David sent ... and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her.’”<sup>[22]</sup> The narrative again emphasizes the rapid execution of David’s single-minded purpose and indirectly “suggests that Bathsheba had little to say about the matter.”<sup>[23]</sup>

*But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.* “[The fact that the account begins the phrase with another significant *But*] indicates that David’s plans are about to go awry as they did following the previous *but* when Uriah refused to go down to his house.”<sup>[24]</sup> The contrastive use of the term “displeased” as applying to Joab in verse 25 and the Lord in verse 27 “seems to be saying that David should have been more concerned about displeasing the Lord than displeasing Joab. ... [The term ‘displeased’] is an ironic understatement [of the Lord’s feelings], saying more by saying less.”<sup>[25]</sup> “Only now, after the adultery, the murder, the remarriage, and the birth of the son, does the narrator make an explicit moral judgment of David’s actions. The invocation of God’s judgment is the introduction to the appearance of Nathan the prophet, delivering first a moral parable ‘wherein to catch the conscience of the king’<sup>[26]</sup> and then God’s grim curse on David and his house.”<sup>[27]</sup>

## Chapter 12

**1 ¶ AND the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two**

**men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor.**

*And the Lord sent.* “The second stage of the story of David and Bathsheba — the phase of accusation and retribution — begins with a virtual pun on a prominent thematic word of the first half of the story. David was seen repeatedly ‘sending’ messengers, arranging for the satisfaction of his lust and the murder of his mistress’s husband through the agency of others. By contrast, God here ‘sends’ his prophet to David —not an act of bureaucratic manipulation but the use of a human vehicle to convey a divine message of conscience.”<sup>[28]</sup>

*Nathan.* David’s most recent child had been given the same name as this prophet,<sup>[29]</sup> perhaps indicating something about the prior relationship between them. In Doctrine and Covenants 132, Nathan is specifically mentioned by the Lord as one of the prophets who had authorized David’s multiple marriages: “David’s wives and concubines were given unto him of me, by the hand of Nathan, my servant, and others of the prophets who had the keys of this power; and in none of these things did he sin against me save in the case of Uriah and his wife.”<sup>[30]</sup>

*There were two men.* “Nathan’s parable, from its very first syllables, makes clear its own status as a traditional tale and a poetic construction. The way one begins a storyteller’s tale in the Bible is with the formula ‘there was a man’ — compare the beginning of Job, or the beginning of the story of Hannah and Elkenah in 1 Samuel 1. The Hebrew prose of the parable also is set off strongly from the language of the surrounding narrative by its emphatically rhythmic character, with a fondness for parallel pairs of terms. ... [T]he two ‘men’ of the opening formula are at the end separated out into ‘rich man,’ ‘poor man,’ and ‘the man who had come’ (in each of these cases, Hebrew ‘ish is used). This formal repetition prepares the way, almost musically, for Nathan’s two-word accusatory explosion, ‘*atah ha’ish*, ‘You are the man!’

Given the patently literary character of Nathan’s tale, which would have been transparent to anyone native to ancient Hebrew culture, it is a little puzzling that David should so precipitously take the tale as a report of fact requiring judicial action. Nathan may be counting on the possibility that the obverse side of guilty conscience in a man like David is the anxious desire to do the right thing. As king, his first obligation is to protect his subjects and to dispense justice, especially to the disadvantaged. In the affair of Bathsheba and Uriah, he has done precisely the opposite. Now, as he listens to Nathan’s tale, David’s compensatory zeal to be a champion of justice overrides any awareness he might have of the evident artifice of the story.”<sup>[31]</sup>



Figure 9. Man carrying small lamb<sup>[32]</sup>

**2 The rich [man] had exceeding many flocks and herds:**

**3 But the poor [man] had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.**

*It did eat... drank... and lay... and was unto him as a daughter.* “[T]he ‘eat/drink/lie’ sequence echoes Uriyya’s earlier refusal of 11:11 ... and the coincidence of *Bat-Sheva*’s name [*bat* = daughter] is surely no coincidence. So while the unwitting king angrily condemns the rich man of the parable, the audience, its ears tuned aright, can feel the trap being sprung.”<sup>[33]</sup>

*lay in his bosom.* “Compare verse 8, ‘thy master’s wives into thy bosom.’”<sup>[34]</sup>

**4 And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man’s lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.**

*And there came a traveller unto the rich man.* “Such occurrences were very common in biblical lands until recent days, and are still to be seen in some feudal countries. The rich men not only did not pay taxes and other levies to the government but also they were allowed by kings and princes to collect for themselves from the poor, to confiscate the fields of the widows and the orphans, and to seize their sheep. ... The prophet composed the parable to see how David would react. This is still done by the Eastern diplomats and government officials.”<sup>[35]</sup> See 2

Samuel 14:7 where the wise woman of Tekoah uses the same approach.

*he spared to take of his own flock.* Alter translates this phrase more literally from the Hebrew: “it seemed a pity to him to take from his own sheep.” “The Hebrew uses an active verb, ‘he pitied,’ preparing for a literal ironic reversal in verse 6, ‘he had no pity’—or, ‘he did not pity.’”<sup>[36]</sup>

*dressed it.* “When [this Hebrew] verb has as its direct object a live edible animal, it means to slaughter and cook.”<sup>[37]</sup>

**5 And David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, [As] the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this [thing] shall surely die:**

*David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man.* “Nathan’s rhetorical trap has now snapped shut. David, by his access of anger, condemns himself, and he is now the helpless target of the denunciation that Nathan will unleash.”<sup>[38]</sup>

*the man... shall surely die.* “Actually, according to biblical law someone who has illegally taken another’s property would be subject to fourfold restitution (verse 6), not to the death penalty. (The Hebrew phrase is literally ‘son of death’ — that is, deserving death just as in 1 Samuel 26:16.) David pronounces this death sentence in his outburst of moral indignation, but it also reflects the way that the parable conflates the sexual ‘taking’ of Bathsheba with the murder of Uriah: the addition of Bathsheba to the royal harem could have been intimated simply by the rich man’s placing the ewe in his flock, but as the parable is told, the ewe must be slaughtered, blood must be shed. David himself will not be condemned to die, but death will hang over his house.”<sup>[39]</sup>

**6 And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.**

*he shall restore the lamb fourfold.* “Unfortunately, David cannot restore fourfold to Uriah that which he as taken, because Uriah is gone. It is interesting in this light, though, to read D&C 132:39, which says that in the next life David will lose his wives — just as the rich man [in the parable was condemned by David to lose] his sheep.”<sup>[40]</sup> “As the Talmud (Yoma 22B) notes, the fourfold retribution for Uriah’s death will be worked out in the death or violent fate of four of David’s [sons]: the unnamed infant son of Bathsheba,<sup>[41]</sup> ... Amnon,<sup>[42]</sup> ... Absalom<sup>[43]</sup> [and Adonijah<sup>[44]</sup>].”<sup>[45]</sup> The Septuagint, “perhaps in the interest of a further reminder of Bathsheba, reads ‘sevenfold’ (instead of fourfold); the number “seven” (Hebrew *šeba*?) corresponds to the second element in the name Bathsheba.”<sup>[46]</sup>



Figure 10. Nathan rebukes David

**7 And Nathan said to David, Thou [art] the man. Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;**

*Thus saith the Lord God of Israel.* “After the direct knife thrust of ‘You are the man!’, Nathan hastens to produce the prophetic messenger formula in its extended form, in this way proclaiming divine authorization for the dire imprecation he pronounces against David and his house.”<sup>[47]</sup> “The author of the David story continually exercises an unblinking vision of David and the institution of the monarchy that exposes their terrible flaws even as he accepts their divinely authorized legitimacy.”<sup>[48]</sup>

**8 And I gave thee thy master’s house, and thy master’s wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if [that had been] too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.**

*thy master’s house.* “This refers to the house of Saul, who was king before David. Saul’s house included both his family (‘thy master’s wives’) and his kingdom (‘the house of Israel and Judah’).”<sup>[49]</sup> Some read “thy master’s house” as “thy master’s daughter,” i.e., Michal.<sup>[50]</sup>

*thy master’s wives.* “[T]here is no mention elsewhere of David’s having taken ... possession of his predecessor’s consorts,<sup>[51]</sup> though this was a practice useful for its symbolic force in a transfer of power, as Absalom will later realize.”<sup>[52]</sup>

*And if [that had been] too little, I would moreover have given unto thee.* “In the first part of the speech, there are several ironic echoes of David’s prayer in chapter 7, in which David thanks God for all His benefactions and professes himself unworthy of them.”<sup>[53]</sup>

**9 Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife [to be] thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.**

*Despised the commandment of the Lord.* “[The Lord] reminds David of all He has done for him and then asks why David has despised Him in return. ‘Despise’ is a strong word, one the Lord uses more than once. The first time, He says David has ‘despised the commandment of the Lord’; the second time, He says David has despised *Him*.”<sup>[54]</sup> In despising the commandments, David has despised the Lord Himself.”<sup>[55]</sup>

*thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword.* “The obliquity of working through agents at a distance, as David did in contriving the murder of Uriah, is exploded by the brutal directness of the language: it is as though David himself had wielded the sword. Only at the end of the sentence are we given the explanatory qualification ‘by the sword of the Ammonites.’”<sup>[56]</sup>

**10 Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife.**

*The sword shall never depart from thine house.* “As Bar-Efrat notes, David’s rather callous message to Joab, ‘the sword sometimes consumes one way and sometimes another,’<sup>[57]</sup> is now thrown back in his face. ... One of the most extraordinary features of the whole David narrative is that this story of the founding of the great dynasty of Judah is, paradoxically, already a tale of the fall of the house of David”<sup>[58]</sup>. “Because David has destroyed Uriah’s house with murder (‘thou has killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword’<sup>[59]</sup>) and adultery (‘and hast taken his wife to be thy wife’<sup>[60]</sup>), his own house will be plagued in like manner with murder (‘the sword shall never depart from thine house’<sup>[61]</sup>) and adultery (‘I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbor, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun’<sup>[62]</sup>). Notice the Lord says He will ‘take’ David’s wives, just as David has taken Uriah’s. The words ‘give’ and ‘take’ recur throughout the narrative. At first the Lord gave, but when David

started to take from others, the Lord took from him.”<sup>[63]</sup> For David, this is not just a temporary loss but an eternal one, as the Lord makes clear when he says that David “hath fallen from his exaltation, and received his portion; and he shall not inherit [his wives and concubines] out of the world, for I gave them unto another.”<sup>[64]</sup>

Given the great blessings that David had previously been promised, were these tragic events a reversal of what God had originally expected and planned? Elder Neal A. Maxwell replies to this question as follows: “Foreordination is like any other blessing — it is a conditional bestowal subject to the recipient’s faithfulness. Prophecies foreshadow events without determining the outcome, this being made possible by a divine foreseeing of outcomes. ... God foresaw the fall of David but was not the cause of it. It was David who saw Bathsheba from the balcony and sent for her and who ordered what happened to her husband, Uriah. But neither was God surprised by such a sad development.”<sup>[65]</sup>

**11 Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give [them] unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun.**

**12 For thou didst [it] secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.**

*before the sun.* “The calamitous misjudgments that defined David’s dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah were a chain of bungled efforts at concealment. Now, in the retribution, all his crimes are to be revealed.”<sup>[66]</sup> The word “sun” appears in verses 11 and 12 to emphasize the “public nature of David’s punishment. ... In all likelihood, many people had heard of David’s sin, so to counteract the bad effects of his example on the people, the Lord’s displeasure had to be made obvious to everyone. David had publicly shamed the Lord; the punishment is a humiliation to David in kind.

The rest of David’s life is a fulfillment of Nathan’s judgment against him. His problems begin when his son Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar, and Absalom, her brother, takes vengeance by killing Amnon. Then Absalom rebels against his father, David, and as part of his rebellion becomes the ‘neighbor’ spoken of in verse 11 to lie with his father’s wives in the sight of the sun.<sup>[67]</sup> And because David is king and ruler over the house of Israel and Judah, the damage doesn’t stop at his own doorstep. The rebellion of Absalom was a political event that affected all Israel. [...[F]urther ‘evil’ from the house of David will persist to his deathbed, as Absalom’s rebellion is followed by Adonijah’s usurpation.<sup>[68], [69]</sup>

Did the Lord engineer all this trouble in order to punish David? The trouble that followed David to the end of his life was according to the pronouncement of the Lord, but it was also the expected consequence of his own bad example before his children and people.”<sup>[70]</sup>

**13 And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.**

*I have sinned against the Lord.* “Compa<sup>[71]</sup>re this with the prodigal son’s confession, ‘I have sinned *against* Heaven.”<sup>[72]</sup>

*The Lord also hath put away thy sin.* The Jewish Study Bible translates the Hebrew for “hath put away” as “‘transferred,’ namely to the young child.” The Joseph Smith Translation renders this as “The Lord also hath *not* put away thy sin *that* thou shalt not die,” which seems to make more sense in this context. “The Lord has just told David that the sword will never leave his house, and he is about to tell him that Bathsheba’s child will die. This is inconsistent with the Lord’s having put away his sin.”<sup>[73]</sup> This is the only change that Joseph Smith made to these two chapters.

**14 Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also [that is] born unto thee shall surely die.**

*the child ... shall surely die.* “Does it seem right that the Lord should take the child instead of David? It may have

been that if the child had lived, others would have died spiritually. David himself may not have fully realized the seriousness of his sin and begun to repent of it if the child hadn't died. Then, too, the very existence of the child would have been a painful reminder of David's sin — a reminder that others might have used to justify their own sins. ... By the child's death, the Lord showed his displeasure with David for all to see. As for the child, the Lord doubtless took him to his bosom, sparing him from what might have been a very difficult life.”<sup>[74]</sup> President Kimball has written that “the gospel teaches us there is no tragedy in death, but only in sin.”<sup>[75]</sup>

**15 ¶ And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick.**

*Uriah's wife.* “At this point, she is still identified as wife of the husband... betrayed in conceiving this child.”<sup>[76]</sup> “David's responsibility in the death of the child is emphasized by doing this.”<sup>[77]</sup>



Figure 11. James Tissot: The sorrow of King David

**16 David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.**

*David fasted ... and lay all night upon the earth.* “David's acts pointedly replicate those of the man he murdered, who refused to go home and eat but instead spent the night lying on the ground with the palace guard.”<sup>[78]</sup>

**17 And the elders of his house arose, [and went] to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them.**

*he would not, neither did he eat bread.* The “incident of the child’s death is gone into at ... great length [in this passage, in order to provide] clues to David’s state of mind following Nathan’s visit.”<sup>[79]</sup>

**18 And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead: for they said, Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spake unto him, and he would not hearken unto our voice: how will he then vex himself, if we tell him that the child is dead?**

*on the seventh day.* “Seven days were the customary period of mourning. In this instance, David enacts a regimen of mourning... before the fact of death.”<sup>[80]</sup>

*how will he then vex himself.* Alter translates this as “He will do some harm.” “Presumably, the courtiers fear that David will do harm to himself in a frenzy of grief.”<sup>[81]</sup>

**19 But when David saw that his servants whispered, David perceived that the child was dead: therefore David said unto his servants, Is the child dead? And they said, He is dead.**

*He is dead.* “In Hebrew, this is a single syllable, *met* ‘dead’ — a response corresponding to idiomatic usage because there is no word for ‘yes’ in biblical Hebrew, and so the person questioned must respond by affirming the key term of the question. It should be noted, however, that the writer has contrived to repeat ‘dead’ five times, together with one use of the verb ‘died,’ in these two verses: the ineluctable bleak fact of death is hammered home to us, just before David’s grim acceptance of it.”<sup>[82]</sup>

**20 Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed [himself], and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the LORD, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat.**

*David rose ... washed ... anointed [himself] ... changed his apparel ... worshipped ... did eat.* “This uninterrupted chain of verbs signifies David’s brisk resumption of the activities of normal life, evidently without speech and certainly without explanation, as the courtier’s puzzlement makes clear. ... David here acts in a way that neither his courtiers nor the audience of the story could have anticipated.”<sup>[83]</sup>

**21 Then said his servants unto him, What thing [is] this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, [while it was] alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread.**

*What thing [is] this that thou hast done?* “The servants question David directly ... instead of circumspectly, as would be expected.”<sup>[84]</sup>

**22 And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell [whether] GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?**

*While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept.* “Does this [phrase indicate] that [David] took a pragmatic, calculated approach to the whole situation, showing grief as long as the Lord might concede? This seems unlikely given that one of the first things David does after the child dies is to worship. A pragmatist would have been angry that his plan had failed. Apparently, David was hoping that the Lord would change his mind, but when he sees that there is no hope, he reconciles himself to the Lord’s will.

[Has] David, at this point, ... repented of his sin? David is sorrowful, but there isn’t much evidence that he has repented. True, he has acknowledged his sin, but that’s just a beginning. Psalm 51, written by David ‘when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba,’ [preface to Psalm 51], contains another open acknowledgment of his sin. Verse 10 of this psalm says, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me,’ implying that, though David recognized his sin, his heart was not yet clean, nor his spirit right. In the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* we read, ‘David sought repentance at the hand of God carefully with tears, for the murder of Uriah; but he could only get it through hell.’<sup>[85]</sup> Part of this ‘hell’ is indicated in later psalms, which show little of the optimism of Psalm 51. For example, Psalm 102:9-10 reads, ‘For I have eaten ashes like

bread, and mingled my drink with weeping, Because of thine indignation and thy wrath: for thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down.”<sup>[86]</sup>

**23 But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.**

*I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.* “If the episode of Bathsheba and Uriah is the great turning point of the David story, these haunting words are the pivotal moment in the turning point. As we have repeatedly seen, every instance of David’s speech in the preceding narrative has been crafted to serve political ends, much of it evincing elaborately artful rhetoric. Now, after the dire curse pronounced by Nathan, the first stage of which is fulfilled in the death of the child, David speaks for the first time not out of political need but in his existential nakedness. The words he utters have a stark simplicity—there are no elegies now—and his recognition of the irreversibility of his son’s death also makes him think of his own mortality. In place of David the seeker and wielder of power, we now see a vulnerable David, and this is how he will chiefly appear through the last half of his story.”<sup>[87]</sup>

**24 And David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her: and she bare a son, and he called his name Solomon: and the LORD loved him.**

*David comforted Bathsheba his wife.* “Now, after the terrible price of the child’s life has been paid for the murder of her husband, the narrator refers to her as David’s wife, not Uriah’s.”<sup>[88]</sup> “Comforting Bathsheba is David’s first unselfish act toward her in this story. ... Bathsheba must have needed comfort: she has ... been seduced, her husband has been killed, she has been perfunctorily remarried, and she has lost the child conceived in the seduction—all in about a year’s time.”<sup>[89]</sup>

*went in unto her ... lay with her ... she bare a son.* Echoing 2 Samuel 11:27, the actions leading up to the birth of the baby are described in rapid-fire succession. The description of the first birth followed a period of mourning by Bathsheba; significantly, the second birth is preceded by David’s mourning. The author having informed us of the king’s sorrow and his desire to comfort Bathsheba, we are now inclined to believe that David is no longer acting unfeelingly and mechanically but rather in a spirit of tenderness born of abject humility. The brief verse opens with a loving act of David, and closes with an act of love from the Lord. The birth of a new child must have been a comfort to both parents.

*he called his name Solomon.* The Hebrew text is ambiguous about which parent named the child, and Alter observes that “[a]s a rule, it was the mother who exercised the privilege.”<sup>[90]</sup> However, David had been told in a previous revelation that he would have a son for whom God “would establish the throne” and that “his name [should] be Solomon.”<sup>[91]</sup> “The [name *Shelomo*’s] connotation of peace (or ‘well-being,’ another meaning of the Hebrew *shalom*), appears in the name of another son, Avshalom [Absalom],”<sup>[92]</sup> but neither Absalom nor the usurper Adonijah’s claims for the throne were ultimately upheld, since David had already sworn to Bathsheba that her infant would one day be his [David’s] successor.<sup>[93]</sup> “The Lord’s loving Solomon, who will disappear from the narrative until the struggle for the throne in 1 Kings 1, foreshadows his eventual destiny, and also harmonizes this name giving with the child’s second name [perhaps his throne name?], Jedidiah, which means [‘beloved of Jehovah’ (see v. 25)].”<sup>[94]</sup> The name “David” has the similar meaning of “beloved,” “hinting at a resolution of the story.”<sup>[95]</sup>

**25 And he sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet; and he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD.**

*And he sent by ... Nathan ... and he called his name Jedidiah.* “The first *he* refers to the Lord; the second to Nathan.”<sup>[96]</sup> “It remains something of a puzzlement that the child should be given two names, one by his mother and the other by God through His prophet. One common suggestion is that Jedidiah was Solomon’s official throne name. ... Nathan’s intervention will [later] prove crucial in securing the throne for Solomon.”<sup>[97]</sup> Perhaps the Jedidiah was given by the prophet at the occasion of the promise David made to Bathsheba about her son becoming his successor.<sup>[98]</sup>

*because of the Lord.* Alter translates this as “by the grace of the Lord.”<sup>[99]</sup>



Figure 12. James Tissot: The mighty men of David

**26 ¶ And Joab fought against Rabbah of the children of Ammon, and took the royal city.**

*Joab fought against Rabbah.* “It is possible, as many scholars have claimed, that the conquest of Rabbah, in the siege of which Uriah had perished, in fact occurs before the birth of Solomon, though sieges lasting two or more years were not unknown in the ancient world.”<sup>[100]</sup> Why, after the peace of the preceding scene, does the author abruptly focus our attention again on the war? “The war frames this story of David’s sin — showing us ... David’s state of mind before he sinned, and his state of mind after. These last events [of chapter 12] seem a reminder that the comfort David felt from Nathan’s second visit wasn’t to last. David’s punishment, pronounced by Nathan, had just begun.”<sup>[101]</sup>

**27 And Joab sent messengers to David, and said, I have fought against Rabbah, and have taken the city of waters**

*I have fought against Rabbah.* “Joab is actually sending David a double message. As dutiful field commander, he urges David<sup>[102]</sup> to hasten to the front so that the conquest of the Ammonite capital will be attributed to him. And yet, he proclaims the conquest in the triumphal formality of a little victory poem (one line, two parallel versets) in which it is he who figures unambiguously as conqueror. This coy and dangerous game Joab plays with David about who has the real power will persist in the story.”<sup>[103]</sup>

*city of waters.* “This refers to the city’s water supply, without which the city couldn’t last long.”<sup>[104]</sup> Joab is announcing, in essence, that victory is imminent.

**28 Now therefore gather the rest of the people together, and encamp against the city, and take it: lest I take the city, and it be called after my name.**

*lest I take the city, and it be called after my name.* “Joab treats David like a subordinate, ordering him around. He lets David know that he [Joab] deserves the glory, but for the sake of appearances David had better get to it. Having acted as David’s accomplice in the sin, Joab feels entitled to lord it over David. David follows Joab’s instructions, but resentfully, as the next few verses show.”<sup>[105]</sup>

**29 And David gathered all the people together, and went to Rabbah, and fought against it, and took it.**

**30 And he took their king's crown from off his head, the weight whereof [was] a talent of gold with the precious stones: and it was [set] on David's head. And he brought forth the spoil of the city in great abundance.**

*And he took their king's crown ... and it was set on David's head.* “The crown would have weighed close to 100 pounds—too much for either the Ammonite King or David to carry on his head. [The Septuagint reads] that the crown was from off the head of the Ammonite idol Milcom, and [some English translations say] that only the precious stone from it was set on David's head. But the Lord's instructions, to the contrary, were: ‘Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree: And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place.’<sup>[106]</sup> It's not clear just how blasphemous this act was. At least it shows a reckless disregard for appearances — perhaps David's way of slapping Joab (who's been so concerned about appearances) in the face. ... David seems to be asserting himself, showing how great and exalted he is, perhaps to compensate for his lack of involvement in the war.’<sup>[107]</sup>

**31 And he brought forth the people that [were] therein, and put [them] under saws, and under harrows of iron, and under axes of iron, and made them pass through the brickkiln: and thus did he unto all the cities of the children of Ammon. So David and all the people returned unto Jerusalem.**

*put [them] under saws, and under harrows of iron, and under axes of iron.* “The meaning of the entire sentence is a little uncertain, but the most plausible reading is that David impressed the male Ammonites into corvée [slave] labor.<sup>[108]</sup> Some have suggested that the Ammonites were forced to tear down the walls of their own cities with the cutting tools listed in the catalogue here, though the reference to the brick mold at the end indicates some sort of construction, not just demolition.’<sup>[109]</sup> “David may not have been unusually harsh for his time, but he was harsh nevertheless, perhaps for a token of bravery to compensate for his irresponsible leadership in the war, or perhaps as a general reaction to the frustration he was feeling. David's salvation was yet to be worked out.’<sup>[110]</sup>

## The Why

Robert Alter summarizes the tragic story of David's fall as follows:

The Book of Samuel is one of those rare masterworks that ... evinces an unblinking and abidingly instructive knowingness about man as a political animal in all his contradictions and venality and in all his susceptibility to the brutalization and the seductions of exercising power. And yet, David is more than a probing representation of the ambiguities of political power. He is also an affecting and troubling image of human destiny as husband and father and as a man moving from youth to prime to the decrepitude of old age. The great pivotal moment of the whole story in this regard is when he turns to his perplexed courtiers, after putting aside the trappings of mourning he had assumed for his ailing infant son, now dead, and says, ‘I am going to him. He will not come back to me.’ These ... words ... have no conceivable political motive[; they] give us a glimpse into his inwardness, revealing his sense of naked vulnerability to the inexorable mortality that is the fate of all humankind. For the rest of the story, we see David's weakness and his bonds of intimate attachment in fluctuating conflict with the imperatives of power that drive him as a king surrounded by potential enemies and betrayers.<sup>[111]</sup>

*My gratitude for the love, support, and advice of Kathleen M. Bradshaw on this article. Thanks also to Stephen T. Whitlock for valuable comments and suggestions.*

## Further Study

This piece from Book of Mormon Central discusses one of the Psalms that was attributed to David after the Bathsheba incident:

<https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-did-lehi-quote-from-a-psalm-of-repentance-in-his-dream>

For other scripture resources relating to this lesson, see The Interpreter Foundation Old Testament Gospel Doctrine Index (<https://interpreterfoundation.org/gospel-doctrine-resource-index/ot-gospel-doctrine-resource-index/>) and the Book of Mormon Central Old Testament KnoWhy list (<https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/tags/old-testament>).

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## Endnotes

[1] Used with permission of Book of Mormon Central. See <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/reference-knowwhy>.

[2] R. Alter, David, p. 253.

[3] Ibid., p. 253.

[4] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 117.

[5] Ibid., p. 117.

[6] Ibid., p. 117.

[7] R. Alter, David, p. 254.

[8] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 117.

[9] Ibid., p. 118.

[10] Judges 9:52-54.

[11] R. Alter, David, p. 254.

[12] See e.g., 2 Samuel 1:14-15; 4:12.

[13] R. Alter, David, p. 255.

[14] Ibid., p. 255.

[15] Ibid., p. 255.

[16] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, pp. 118-119.

[17] R. Alter, David, p. 255.

[18] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 119.

[19] E. Fox, Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David, p. 202. See 2 Samuel 12:24.

[20] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 119.

[21] R. Alter, David, p. 256.

[22] Ibid., p. 256

[23] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 119.

[24] Ibid., p. 120.

[25] Ibid., p. 120.

[26] W. Shakespeare, Hamlet, 2:2:605, p. 1159.

[27] R. Alter, David, p. 256.

[28] Ibid., p. 257.

[29] See 2 Samuel 5:15.

[30] D&C 132:39.

[31] R. Alter, David, p. 257.

[32] Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY, National Museum, Aleppo, Syria, published in V. P. Long, 2 Samuel (Zondervan).

[33] E. Fox, Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David, p 189.

[34] R. Alter, David, p. 258.

[35] G. M. Lamsa, Light, pp. 333-334.

[36] R. Alter, David, p. 258.

[37] Ibid., p. 258.

- [38] Ibid., p. 258.
- [39] Ibid., p. 258.
- [40] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 125.
- [41] 2 Samuel 12:14, 18.
- [42] 2 Samuel 13:28–29.
- [43] 2 Samuel 18:14–15.
- [44] 1 Kings 2:24–25.
- [45] R. Alter, David, p. 258.
- [46] V. P. Long, 2 Samuel (Zondervan), 2 Samuel 12:6. Cf. Proverbs 6.31.
- [47] R. Alter, David, p. 259.
- [48] Ibid., p. 260.
- [49] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 122.
- [50] A. Berlin *et al.*, Jewish, 2 Samuel 12:7. See 2 Samuel 3:13–16.
- [51] “The Talmud (Sanhedrin 18a) and a number of modern scholars have speculated that David’s wife Ahinoam, the mother of Amnon (see 2 Samuel 3:2; 1 Samuel 25:43), was the same as Saul’s wife, Ahinoam daughter of Ahimaaz (1 Samuel 14:50)” (ibid., 2 Samuel 12:7).
- [52] R. Alter, David, p. 259. See 2 Samuel 16:20-22; compare Reuben’s similar symbolic usurpation of Jacob’s authority recorded and condemned in Genesis 49:4 and I Chronicles 5:1.
- [53] Ibid., p. 259.
- [54] See verse 10.
- [55] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 122.
- [56] R. Alter, David, p. 259.
- [57] 2 Samuel 11:25.
- [58] Alter, 1999 #310}, p. 259.
- [59] verse 9.
- [60] verse 10.
- [61] verse 10.
- [62] verse 11.
- [63] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 123.
- [64] D&C 132:39.
- [65] N. A. Maxwell, Small Moment, p. 97.
- [66] R. Alter, David, p. 260.
- [67] See 2 Samuel 16:20-22.
- [68] 1 Kings 1-2.
- [69] R. Alter, David, p. 260.
- [70] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 123.
- [71] A. Berlin *et al.*, Jewish, 2 Samuel 12:13. See Exodus 34:7.
- [72] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 124. See Luke 15:21.
- [73] Ibid., p. 124.
- [74] Ibid., pp. 124-125.
- [75] S. W. Kimball, Tragedy, p. 101.
- [76] R. Alter, David, p. 260.
- [77] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 126.
- [78] R. Alter, David, p. 261.
- [79] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 126.
- [80] R. Alter, David, p. 261.
- [81] Ibid., p. 261.
- [82] Ibid., p. 261.
- [83] Ibid., p. 261.
- [84] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 126.
- [85] J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, p. 339.
- [86] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 127.
- [87] R. Alter, David, p. 262.

- [88] Ibid., p. 262.
- [89] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 127.
- [90] R. Alter, David, p. 262.
- [91] 1 Chronicles 22:9-10.
- [92] E. Fox, Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David, p. 207.
- [93] 1 Kings 1:17; 30.
- [94] R. Alter, David, p. 262.
- [95] E. Fox, Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David, p. 207.
- [96] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 128.
- [97] R. Alter, David, p. 263. See 1 Kings 1:1-30
- [98] See I Kings 1:17, 30, which retrospectively reports the oath David had made.
- [99] R. Alter, David, p. 263.
- [100] Ibid., p. 263.
- [101] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, pp. 128-129.
- [102] verse 28.
- [103] R. Alter, David, p. 263.
- [104] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 129.
- [105] Ibid., p. 129.
- [106] Deuteronomy 12:2-3.
- [107] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 129.
- [108] Cf. David's treatment of the Moabites in 2 Samuel 8:2.
- [109] R. Alter, David, p. 264.
- [110] D. Packard *et al.*, Feasting, p. 130.
- [111] R. Alter, David, pp. xviii-xix.