

Nevertheless She Persisted: Bathsheba
2 Samuel 11 and 1 Kings 1
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The United States colonized the Philippines after the Spanish-American War in 1898, when Spain ceded the Philippines to the U.S. in the Treaty of Paris.

In 1899, the Filipinos took up arms in a bid for independence. The U.S. deployed 125,000 troops to persuade them otherwise. The war lasted more than three years and devastated the country. Filipinas who had never considered sex work were forced into it as a matter of survival. And American men who had not previously known any Asian women now found themselves in a country where most women they met worked in the sex industry. The U.S. military registered sex workers, regularly tested them for diseases, and tagged them, like pets. The military justified this system as a matter of imperial necessity.

In an interview, historian Paul Kramer said that military leadership believed the soldiers were aggressively sexual and needed a sexual outlet in the military theater. If the military hadn't set up a system and inspected women, then the soldiers would have gotten sick and not been any good on the battlefield. It presumes all these things about men's sexuality and then essentially says, 'This is a pragmatic matter of manpower. We need men to be healthy and fit.'

Lee Ok-seon was running an errand for her parents when a group of uniformed men burst out of a car, attacked her, and dragged her into the vehicle. As they drove away, she had no idea she would never see her parents again. She was 14 years old. The teenager was taken to a so-called "comfort station"—a brothel that serviced Japanese soldiers—in Japanese-occupied China. There, she became one of the tens of thousands of "comfort women" subjected to forced prostitution by the imperial Japanese army between 1932 and 1945.¹ They were known as "comfort women" because the military justified the violence done to them as a necessity to ensure the strength of the soldiers. You'd think there would be a better tactic for ensuring military success than encouraging the rape and abuse of Asian women. In her book *The Hero and the Whore*, Filipina author Camille Hernandez writes, "Wherever there is a lust for power and dominance there is war: in our country, in our neighborhoods, in our churches, and in our homes. Not too far behind the places where war exists will be the bodies of tortured women."²

¹ <https://www.history.com/news/comfort-women-japan-military-brothels-korea>, accessed 11/22/24.

² Hernandez, Camille. *The Hero and the Whore: Reclaiming Healing and Liberation through Stories of Sexual Exploitation in the Bible*. (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2023), 126.

Which brings us to the story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. Hers is a story of men and their lust for power and war. But it is also a story of grit and resilience. Bathsheba's story, of course, begins with David.

This is 2 Samuel 11:1-5.

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

2 It happened, late one afternoon when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. 3 David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." 4 So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. 5 The woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

To be clear: Bathsheba was raped by David. David was the king; he was the one with all the power. He knew she was married to someone else, one of his soldiers in fact, but that did not stop him from "sending his messengers" to get her. Why, do you think, he sent more than one messenger? To make it clear that she had no choice but to go where they told her to go. Her pregnancy was not good news for David. His little indiscretion was suddenly not so discreet.

To cover his tracks, he sent for Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, who was busy at war. David's idea was that if Uriah came home, he would have sex with his wife and presumably she would conceive. Everyone would assume the baby Bathsheba was carrying was her husband's. What David didn't count on was that Uriah was the kind of guy, unlike David, who felt bad about being at home having sex when he should have been fighting. So, he refused to go home. He hung out by the palace gates. David even tried to get him drunk, thinking surely then he would go home to be with his wife. He did not.

David sent him back to the front, with a letter for his commander, Joab, who was David's nephew. Unbeknownst to Uriah, the letter he delivered instructed Joab to send him to the front and make sure he got killed. Which he did. Having murdered her husband, David brought Bathsheba into the palace. Bathsheba, grieving the loss of her husband, pregnant with her rapist's child, was now living with her rapist.

God was pissed, so he sent the prophet Nathan to set David straight. Nathan told him this story:

"There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds, 3 but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare and drink from his cup and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had

come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." 5 Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; 6 he shall restore the lamb fourfold because he did this thing and because he had no pity." "You are the man," Nathan says to David. (2 Samuel 12:1-7)

Notice in the story that the victim is the man, not the lamb. David had wronged Uriah...he raped his wife and then he killed him. But there was no mention of the damage done to Bathsheba. She kind of conveniently disappeared. So much so that the consequences David was given for his actions were that, his son, the child Bathsheba was carrying, would die. Never mind what that would do to Bathsheba. The child was born and David fasted and prayed until the child died.

Then David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He went into the house of the Lord and worshiped; he then went to his own house, and when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. 21 Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive, but when the child died, you rose and ate food." 22 He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live.' 23 But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." 24 Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba and went to her and lay with her, and she bore a son, and he named him Solomon. (2 Samuel 12:20-23)

I am sure that was exactly the kind of consolation she wanted. To be raped again. The house of David was a place where the undercurrents of war existed constantly. David had at least 20 sons by his various wives and concubines, leading to infighting and competition and, not surprisingly, the women often paid the price.

Bathsheba isn't mentioned again in the text until she appears in 1 Kings where David is on his deathbed. He was old, frail, confused, and impotent. His son Adonijah was next in the line of succession and was vigorously pursuing the throne. Nathan, concerned that Adonijah would have Bathsheba and Solomon killed as soon as David died, went to Bathsheba and told her what she must do to keep Adonijah from seizing power. Bathsheba did what he said and went to David's room and found him cuddled up with a beautiful woman who was there to keep him warm and comfortable. Scripture is clear that David was unable to have sex with her, but his power was still being used as a weapon against another woman. The woman was essentially David's "comfort woman."

Bathsheba had to confront the person who used his power to rape her while he was using his power to objectify another woman. Bathsheba explained Adonijah's power grab and reminded David of the promise he made to her. She said, "My Lord, you swore to your servant by the Lord your God, saying, 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne. But now, suddenly, Adonijah has become

king, and you, my Lord the king, don't know it." She went on to tell him that he needed to set things right or Adoniyah would kill her and Solomon because Solomon would be seen as a threat to Adoniyah's succession.

This promise has been a hotly debated topic because there is no record elsewhere in scripture of that promise being made. So of course, there are scholars who describe Bathsheba's actions here as manipulative. They say she took advantage of David's poor health and confusion. To that, I say, he had it coming. In *The Hero and the Whore*, Hernandez writes, "Holding those views is another form of victim blaming. In order to survive Bathsheba needed to mold into the environment she was in." She goes on to say, "It's irrelevant to me whether or not David actually made the promise to Bathsheba...I do not blame Bathsheba; instead, I find her to be someone who lives in the intersection of grit, resilience, and healing."³ The biblical storyteller gives us no indication Bathsheba's character ever gets healing. But it is grit and resilience that kept her and her son alive. Before he died, David made sure Solomon was the next king.

Bathsheba's story leaves me feeling different than I felt about Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth's stories. I think that's because, while the other women were able to secure a little bit of agency for themselves amid an oppressive patriarchal world, I am not sure Bathsheba ever did. This doesn't diminish her courage and grit in my eyes; it just makes me sad. In the stories of the other women, the writers allowed the women a mic drop moment, a moment that felt to me, even thousands of years later, like they won. And to be fair, Bathsheba does end up the Queen Mother, so that would have been cool after David kicked off.

The question left before us then is, why did the author of Matthew include Bathsheba in Jesus' family tree? Before I answer that, you should know, Bathsheba's name does not appear in chapter one of Matthew.

It says this: "And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah..." The text could very easily have said, "And David was the father of Solomon." As much as I would love to say that Bathsheba was mentioned because of her courage and grit...and honestly, since it is Mary we have been depending on to tell these stories to Jesus, looking at Mary's story would be a great place to find that same courage and grit within the Gospel text. But, to be honest, I think "the wife of Uriah" was mentioned not for what she did, but for what was done to her. "The wife of Uriah" "serves to remind readers of the story surrounding Solomon's birth: a story tinged with the violation of a woman, betrayal, murder, marriage, and the death of a baby, Solomon's older brother."⁴ The author of Matthew wanted readers to be sure and notice David's guilt, especially compared to Uriah's innocence.

³ Hernandez, 128.

⁴ Clements, Anne E. *Mothers on the Margin? The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy*, (Pickwick Publishing, Eugene Oregon: 2014), 141.

I think it's important to note that the stories of all the women in the Bible are told by men. And honestly, in this season of life, for me, that's infuriating. Although, the fact that we have been given even a glimpse of the bravery and strength women in those times and places must have had is nothing short of miraculous. Within these stories, there aren't a lot of historical facts, but there is a lot of truth. The truth is that Tamar, a foreign woman, was more righteous than, Judah, Jacob's son. The truth is, Tamar saved herself. Rahab showed mercy to the enemy in a world where she was surrounded by war and frankly hadn't been shown much mercy in her life. And having done so, she saved her family. And the truth is, Rahab saved herself. Ruth loved Naomi even when she wasn't particularly lovable and she saved her. The truth is Ruth saved herself. The truth is, Bathsheba survived every woman's worst nightmare. And the truth is, she saved herself. In all of these stories, the actions of the men caused death and the actions of the women brought forth life. Because that is what women do.

The truth for us today is that men continue to tell stories that really aren't theirs to tell. And they tell them in ways that very often diminish, dismiss, and devalue the accomplishments, contributions, and badassery of the women. One of the ways we can live into who we are as followers of Jesus is to make sure women have the opportunity to be the heroes of their own stories and to tell their own stories on their own terms.

One of the reasons Jesus seems so "woke" in the gospels is that, in a world where women were silenced, he listened to them. He listened to the Samaritan woman at the well amid her loneliness, he listened to Martha's frustration when she felt like she was doing all the work, and he listened to countless others. I hope that was because he knew the stories of his faith, but more than that, I hope it was because he saw his dad and other men in his life, listening to his mother and the other women in his life. I hope he had that. And I believe Jesus wants that for all of us, for all children, for all families (given and chosen), however they look. As followers of Jesus, we must listen to the stories and experiences of women and believe them. If this series was about anything, it is that.

I will end this morning with a blessing written by Joanna Harder for her Advent devotional, *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*.

It's called Bathsheba's Blessing:
Nobody knows what to make of me.
Temptress or victim.
Bride or widow.
Queen or concubine.
Calculating or naïve.

Siblings, listen:

People will write their own stories over your life---
Fill in their own motives.
Project their own fears,
Reach for their own dreams.
Your life---as it turns out---has very little to do with you.
At least how they tell it.

Which is why their story cannot be your guide;
Why you must bathe in your garden without guilt;
Why you must mourn your beloveds however you can;
Why you cannot believe the lie
That their abuse was actually a favor
To grant you a palace and a prince.

Even though my story is not well told,
You know, at least, that I finally found a throne.
So from my royal seat,
With whatever power it offers,
I bestow on you this blessing:
For companions with integrity;
For moments of delightful abandon;
For love deep enough to cause grief;
For consolation.

May you have the power that is your due
And use that power on behalf of the vulnerable ---
Even if the vulnerable one is you.

May you write your own story,
And may it be told by compassionate voices
In all generations to come.
Amen.