

David's Walk on the Roof

Hespele, 25 July 2021 © Scott McAndless

2 Samuel 11:1-15, Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

For centuries, Western Christianity was pretty sure that it knew what was going on in the story of David and Bathsheba. It was plain enough to see if you looked at the art and read the literature or if you listened to the sermons that were preached. It was obvious, everybody thought it was obvious, that Bathsheba was to blame – that she had intentionally set out to seduce David and lead him astray.

The scene where David sees Bathsheba bathing, was one of the classical scenes painted by many a western artist. And every one of them is the kind of painting that you probably wouldn't show in a church because Bathsheba is always oozing with sexuality and seduction, she has clearly set out to target David with her feminine wiles.

Leonard Cohen's Take

That was the story and remained the story at least until 1984 when Leonard Cohen wrote what has probably become his most famous song: "Hallelujah." The song doesn't name Bathsheba in it, though it does name David so the reference is pretty obvious when Cohen writes, *"Your faith was strong but you needed proof. You saw her bathing on the roof. Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew ya. She tied you to a kitchen chair, She broke your throne, and she cut your hair. And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah."*

That verse illustrates well how the story has been heard down through the centuries (at least, if you leave out the little bit where he makes reference to Delilah cutting Samson's hair). It portrays David as the hapless and impotent victim while Bathsheba is the active one. David has strong faith but apparently just has a weak moment. She is the one who overthrows him, who breaks his throne.

Most of all, of course, she is out there bathing on her roof where she obviously knows that David is going to see her and be entranced. I love that Leonard Cohen song and where he went with it. But, in his references to the story of David and Bathsheba, he really did not stray far from the typical reading of the story that had persisted in Western society for a long time and still persists in many ways right up until today.

Another Story

And there is a reason why the story has been read in that way. It is not, as I intend to show you, because that is what the story actually says in the Bible. It's because of another story that has long been told in Western society about men and women and how they relate to each other. It is a story that declares, for one thing, that men, at least if they are real men, have a natural drive that makes them aggressive and dominating. This drive is so powerful that, when presented with something alluring, they



practically cannot control their response. This is the myth of male sexuality, and it is a myth that is reinforced every time you hear somebody say, “Boys will be boys,” and try to explain away aggressive or abusive behaviour.

At the same time, a story is told about women. The story is that women do not have the same kind of intense drives. Therefore, women need to take on the role of making sure that men are not overstimulated. They are encouraged to dress modestly and not revealingly, the idea being that if a woman shows too much skin, it is her fault if a man responds with sexual aggression. After all, he can't control himself, but presumably she can.

A False Story

And I want to be clear here that that story is pure bunk. Men and women might feel their drives and desires a little bit differently, but there is no difference in intensity. Even more important, both men and women are quite capable of controlling their response to stimuli and of acting in a way that respects the autonomy of others. No one is powerless to stop themselves from harassing or abusing somebody else.

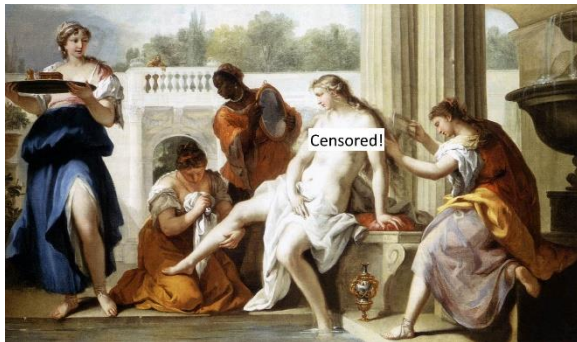
But that is the story that we have kept telling ourselves for a very long time with the predictable result that, when somebody is raped or harassed, the victim is often the one who gets all the blame. That is why we often ask what *she* was wearing or why *she* was where she was. It is why we are often more interested in *her* sexual history than in his. Meanwhile, the aggressor is often able to find some way to justify his (and yes, it is usually *his*) behaviour.

And somehow that Western story of the relationship between the sexes got read into the story of David and Bathsheba with the result that we have come to see things in that story that were never part of the original text.

Where was she Bathing?

Take, for example, the question of where Bathsheba was taking her bath. Everybody just knows that she was taking it on the roof of her house, that is to say that she was taking it in a place where she knew that David might see her because she intended to be seen. Isn't it what Leonard Cohen sings in his song? But he certainly didn't invent that idea. As I said, Western art has delighted to portray this particular scene down through the centuries, and you can be sure that that is exactly where the artists have placed Bathsheba, on her roof.

So, we all know where Bathsheba was bathing. There is just one problem, that is not what it says in the text. This is what it says: **“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.”**



Who is on the Roof?

Who was on the roof there? Well, David of course! Actually, it doesn't say where Bathsheba was bathing, but the obvious thing that we are supposed to assume, given the practices at that time, is that she was bathing where women would normally bathe at that time and in that culture. She was bathing in a closed courtyard, either the courtyard in the centre of her own house, or perhaps she is in a public courtyard that was maintained exclusively for women in the city for their monthly ritual bath that was required under the law.

Whichever kind of courtyard she was in, however, it was considered to be private space where she would be hidden from passersby on the streets. She certainly wouldn't have been seen from the roof of any ordinary neighbouring house.

David's Height Advantage

So why could David see her? Well, obviously because he didn't live in any ordinary sort of house. His wealth and power meant that his palace towered over all the houses in the city so that he could peek into any courtyard he liked. And the suggestion of the story seems to be that, when David was feeling restless, he liked to go up on the roof of his palace and pass his time peeking into the houses of his neighbours – perhaps specifically looking for women taking their monthly ritual baths! So there really is no question; Bathsheba was doing nothing to entrap David's gaze. David, in fact, was actually seeking to direct his gaze where it really didn't belong.

Bathsheba's "Consent"

But there is another part of the story where people have traditionally sought to blame Bathsheba and that is in the fact that, when David sends for her, she goes to him. Surely, it has been suggested, this is an indication that she had been seeking to ensnare him all along. If she didn't want it, she should have just said no. Since she went, she must have consented.

But you only need to think for a moment before you realize that it is much more complicated than that. It says that David sent messengers to her. Well, who did he send? Did he send one of his warriors with a sword strapped to his side? One of his bodyguards, a muscle-bound enforcer dressed in leather? If you were a woman living alone in your house and you were confronted with a messenger like that, how free would you really feel to say no?

To be honest, even if David sent the mildest of messengers that he could find, Bathsheba would not have felt the freedom to say no because, no matter who the messenger was, she knew the kind of power the sender of the message had. She knew that he had the power to punish her and even to kill her if she said no. And any consent that is given under those kinds of conditions is not genuine consent. The reality is that Bathsheba had no opportunity and no power to say no.

Let's Call it Rape

And so there really is no doubt about what David did to Bathsheba. We'd call it rape today. By every modern legal definition, that is what David did to her. The definition was a little bit different in ancient Israel where power of consent did not actually belong with the woman, but, even there, there is no escaping that that is what David did. And the Bible really was never ambiguous about that. Indeed, it tells us that the prophet Nathan confronted David with that very accusation.

So, I think it's plain to see that when you examine the story of David and Bathsheba closely, it really doesn't say what western society seems to have decided a long time ago that it says. That, for me, is one of the really powerful things about the Bible. It has this way of correcting our willful misinterpretations

Misusing the Bible

We often act like everything the Bible says has always been settled. "The Bible said it, I believe it and that settles it," the argument seems to go. And people have used that approach to the Bible to support horrible things. The institution of slavery, people confidently taught, was right and good because that was how the Bible said it should be. The Indian Residential School system was a good thing, preachers taught, because the Bible taught that these people were merely savages that needed to be converted, by force if necessary. And women were evil temptresses who needed to keep their sexuality under control because the Bible said that Bathsheba led David astray by bathing on her roof.

People will indeed use the Bible to support all kinds of things, even evil things, that they have already decided to do. But the wonderful thing about the Bible is that it is always there, the original text still accessible, and we can always go back and look at the story within its wider context, and we suddenly realize that maybe these things were not quite as clear cut as we were taught.

Repentance

So I think it is time for us to repent of some of the things that we have said that the Bible said about sex, sexual assault and rape. Let me declare it here and now, women are not responsible for the sexual sins of men. We are, each one of us, responsible, no matter what the situation, to treat other people with respect as human beings created in the image of God. Our teaching around sexual assault should not be that women need to be modest or cautious, it needs to be that men must be respectful of the autonomy and value of women and of all.

We also need to teach that those who have more power, like David represented by his lofty palace had more power, need to be even more careful about respecting others. The greater your power, the greater your responsibility. There have been far too many stories of men, in particular, who have amassed power in this world – movie producers, comedians, politicians and many others – who have gotten away with abuse, harassment and rape simply because of their position. That needs to change.

And really the church should be at the forefront of asking for that change. But the problem is, there have also been all kinds of stories of powerful men in churches – pastors, teachers and other leaders – who have been doing exactly the same thing. Clearly the church is not immune from this problem, and we need to stop pretending that it is.

So, let us not fall into the trap of thinking that, just because we've always been told that this is what a certain passage or story from the Bible means, that is necessarily true. Why not let the Bible speak for itself. And where we have gone wrong, and where our interpretations have led to people being hurt and victimized, let us not fail to repent and to make the necessary changes.