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The Death of David's Son by Bathsheba (II Sam 12:13-25): A Narrative in Context

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Abstract

The episode of David's sin and his punishment (II Sam 11-12) represents a turning point in the description of David's reign. While this dramatic episode has received extensive attention in biblical exegesis, the final section of the narrative, recording the death of Bathsheba's son, has been largely neglected, with little attention to its contribution to the story.

In this article I propose that the main contribution of the story is its exposure of his inner world following the revelation of his sin by the prophet Nathan. The biblical narrative conveys its ideas in an indirect manner, through various literary devices. By means of analogies, discrepancies between descriptions, and secondary characters, the text hints at David's process of repentance for his sin. We might say that David undergoes a process in two stages: Initially, immediately after the speech by the prophet Nathan, he demonstrates a repentance that is quick and spontaneous, but only partial. Thereafter he undergoes a process of slow and gradual repentance, in which he repairs all the levels of his sin.

Keywords

II Samuel, Narrative in context, David, David's son

In the last two decades of the 20th century, Yair Zakovitch published three studies in which he demonstrated the importance of reading a biblical narrative within its context.¹ Zakovitch called such reading "narrative in exegetical

*¹ *Dedicated with love and longing to my daughter Rotem of blessed memory, 2001-2008.*

¹ Y. Zakovitch, "'Ale-Kereah'—Exegetical Circles in Biblical Narrative", *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 8 (1985), pp. 7-23 (Heb); Y. Zakovitch, "'Elisha Died... He Came to Life and Stood Up' (2 Kings 13:20-21): A Short 'Short Story' in Exegetical Circles", in M. Fishbane, E. Tov (eds.), *"Sháarei Talmon"—Studies in the Bible, Qumran and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake, 1992), pp. 53-62 (Heb); Y. Zakovitch, "Is David Also Among

circles", and argued that sometimes an isolated narrative cannot be properly understood without an examination of its context. In this article I seek to illustrate the importance of reading in context, with a focus on the narrative about the death of David's son by Bathsheba.

The episode of David's sin and his punishment (II Sam 11-12) represents a turning point in the description of David's reign: up to this point the text has described his ascent; after his sin he is struck by a series of personal and political setbacks. While this dramatic episode has received extensive attention in biblical exegesis from the period of the Talmud and the ancient commentators up until modern times, the final section of the narrative, recording the death of Bathsheba's son, has been largely neglected, with little attention to its contribution to the story.

The narrative raises a number of questions and textual difficulties:

- a. After hearing David's declaration of repentance, the prophet Nathan announces, "God too has commuted your sin; you shall not die;² however, since you have caused blasphemy . . . in this matter, the child also who is born to you shall surely die" (12:13-14). If David has truly repented, why is it necessary for his son to die? What is gained by the death of a young child?³
- b. David's son does not die immediately, he lingers and suffers for seven days: "And God struck the child which Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he was gravely ill" (12:15). Why must it take seven days for the infant to die?

the Prophets? I Sam. 21:11-16 in *Circles of Inner-Biblical Interpretation*, *Shnaton* 11 (1997), pp. 114-130 (Heb).

² An additional and separate question that arises here is where and when the decree of death for David, as mentioned here by the prophet, was passed. The conventional answer is that this is hinted at in David's own words: 'The man who has done this is deserving of death' (12:5); see Abarbanel (verse 13); J. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol 1 (Assen, 1981), p. 87; S. Bar-Efrat, *II Samuel—Introduction and Commentary* (Mikra le-Yisra'el; Tel Aviv, 1996), p. 122 (Heb). For a different view which severs verse 5 from verse 13, see Gwilym H. Jones, *The Nathan Narrative* (JSOTS 80; Sheffield, 1990), pp. 106-107. See also H. S. Pyper, *David as Reader—2 Samuel 12:1-15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood* (BIS 23; Leiden, 1996), pp. 157-158.

³ Several commentators and scholars have addressed this question. Radak (verse 13), Abarbanel (verse 122) and also Bar-Efrat, *Samuel*, p. 122 and Jones, *Nathan*, p. 107 explain that the child must die because he was born in sin. Herzberg views the child as a sacrifice to save David from any future harm: H. W. Herzberg, *1 and 2 Samuel, A Commentary*, Trans. by J. S. Bouden, (OTL; Philadelphia, 1964), p. 316. According to McCarter, the sin is so severe that David's repentance cannot atone for it fully; all it can achieve is to transfer David's death sentence to his son: See K. McCarter, *1-2 Samuel, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; N. Y., 1984), p. 301. See also A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC; Dallas, 1989), p. 163, and K. L. Noll, *The Faces of David* (JSOTS 242; Sheffield, 1997), p. 67.

- c. What is the meaning of David's actions during the seven days of the child's illness (12:16-17)? Is he observing the ritual customs of mourning, as most scholars maintain?⁴
- d. Why does David cease these activities immediately with the child's death (12:20)? This is especially difficult to understand if his behavior indeed reflects the observation of mourning customs.⁵
- e. David's servants are given extensive exposure over the course of this brief narrative (they are involved in six out of the thirteen verses of the story: 12:18-23). What is the role of David's servants as secondary characters? Why does David's conduct after the death of the infant arouse such surprise

⁴) Various possibilities have been raised to explain David's actions; most of these proceed from the assumption that during the child's illness David was observing the customs of mourning. This assumption is based, *inter alia*, on the fact that the infant dies after seven days (12:17), and the traditional mourning period lasts seven days. According to Abarbanel (verses 21-23), David pretended to mourn in order to hide from his wife and his servants the knowledge that the child's illness was the result of the father's sin. Fokkelman maintains that David knew that there was no chance of saving the child's life, and therefore began mourning for him already during the seven days of his illness. See Fokkelman, *Narrative*, p. 90. As noted above (n. 3), Herzberg adopts a completely different approach, proposing that David treats the death of the child as the offering of a sacrifice; see Herzberg, *Samuel*, p. 316, and Seizo Sekine, *Transcendence and Symbols in the Old Testament—A Genealogy of the Hermeneutical Experiences* (Berlin, 1999), p. 148.

⁵) Pedersen maintains that David's behavior represented a new Israelite approach to mourning—see J. E. Pedersen, *Israel* (London, 1940), vol. 4, pp. 455-457. According to Herzberg, now that the sacrifice has been accepted, David no longer has any reason to fear; see Herzberg, *Samuel*, p. 316. To Jones's view, too, David ceases his mourning because he views the child's death as signaling God's forgiveness of his sin; see Jones, *Nathan*, pp. 198-110. Fokkelman suggests that David completed his period of mourning during the child's illness; see Fokkelman, *Narrative*, p. 90. Brueggmann maintains that the text presents David as a man who abandons conventions and trusts in God to watch over him, by virtue of the promise in II Sam 7; see Walter Brueggmann, "The Trusted Creature", *CBQ* 31(1969), pp. 489-490. Hagan proposes that David has not yet had time to form an emotional bond with the child, and therefore behaves in a seemingly insensitive manner: see Harry Hagan, "Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Sm 9-20, 1 Kgs 1-2", *Biblica* 60 (1979), p. 308. According to Stolz, David no longer sees any reason to continue mourning after the child has died; see F. Stolz, *Das erste Buch Samuel (ZBK, 9; Zurich, 1981)*, p. 242. A possibility raised by Anderson is that David's conduct changes because it may now have become public knowledge that the child was not Uriah's, but rather his own; see Anderson, *Samuel*, p. 164. Polak attributes David's conclusion of his fast to "indifference"; see Frank Polak, *Biblical Narrative—Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 299 (Heb). See also Stuart Lasine, "Melodrama as Parable: The Story of the Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb and the Unmasking of David's Topsy-Turvy Emotions", *HAR* 8 (1984), pp. 114-115.

among them? After all, David's explanation sounds eminently logical and reasonable!⁶

Most of these questions have been addressed in the past, by ancient commentators and modern scholars alike, but no exegetical approach has yet been proposed which addresses the narrative in its entirety, and in context. A contextual reading may contribute to our understanding of the story and a solution to the many difficulties which it raises.

Our first task is to locate the unit concerning the child's death within the overall narrative.⁷ The story of David's sin and his punishment occupies Chapters 11-12 in their entirety. The episode begins with the dispatch of Joab to besiege the city of Rabbah (II Sam 11:1) and concludes with the description of the capture of Rabbah by Joab and David (II Sam 12:26-31).⁸

The conventional view of the story divides it into two parts: the sin (Chapter 11) and the punishment (Chapter 12). Chapter 11 begins and ends with emissaries dispatched by David: "David sent Joab (11:1); "David sent and fetched her to his house" (11:27). Chapter 12 begins and ends with messengers dispatched by God to David: "God sent Nathan" (12:1); "He sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet" (12:25).⁹ Both chapters mention God at their conclusion: Chapter 11 records God's anger—"And the thing was evil . . . in the eyes of God" (11:27), while Chapter 12 reflects friendship with God: "He called his name Jedidiah (lit: "friend of God"), for God" (12:25).¹⁰

⁶ A different opinion is voiced by Sharon, who compares the death of David's son to the narrative describing the death of Aaron's sons (Lev 10:15-20), and asserts that David's actions surprise not only his servants, but also the reader; see Diane M. Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat: The Trope of Rejecting Food and Drink in Biblical Narrative", *Semeia* 86 (1999), pp. 135-148. Alter, too, senses the reader's surprise at David's actions: see R. Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York, 1999), p. 261. Smith likewise regards the servants' surprise as logical and natural: see H. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Samuel* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1977), p. 325.

⁷ Concerning the structure of the story see U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Jerusalem, 1997) pp. 113-118 (Heb). I accept the structure which he proposes, with slight amendments. It must be noted that many scholars have treated Chapter 12, verses 16-23 as an independent unit: see, for example, Randall C. Bailey, "David in Love and War—The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12" (*JOTS* 75; Sheffield, 1990), p. 113.

⁸ The parallel text in Chronicles omits David's sin and presents the two military units in succession (I Chron 20:1-3). This serves to confirm the boundaries of the narrative as set forth above.

⁹ The use of the verb "*sh-l-h*" (to send) in relation to a prophet is exceedingly rare; it occurs only here and in Judges 6:8. Concerning this root as a key word in this chapter, see R. Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist, A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (Bloomington, 1993), pp. 114-117.

¹⁰ The verses which follow (26-31) form part of the historical framework, as mentioned.

The second part of the story, i.e. Chapter 12, may in turn be divided into two parts:

Verses 1-12—the parable of the poor man's ewe lamb, and its meaning;

Verses 13-25—David repents for his sin.

Following his repentance we find a description of how the child born to Bathsheba falls ill and dies, David's responses to the illness and to the death, and the way in which his servants react to his actions.

David's sin is described in detail over the course of Chapter 11. The prophet's response—the parable of the ewe lamb and its interpretation by Nathan—is likewise elaborate, occupying verses 1-12 of Chapter 12. It is specifically against the background of this lengthy and detailed buildup that David's repentance is recorded with astonishing brevity: "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned unto God'" (12:13). On the simplest level, we might suggest that the text seeks to emphasize and commend David's quick, spontaneous, and impressive reaction.¹¹ However, it may also disclose a certain discomfort in the face of David's alacrity, perhaps reflecting the sinner's haste and lack of understanding of his own sin.

Indeed, David's sin is not a simple and straightforward violation. The killing of Uriah by David is in fact a three-fold transgression against the man himself, against the nation, and against God. On the most basic level, David's sin is directed against the individual—Uriah. In broader terms, David's sin against Uriah is symbolically a sin against the entire nation of Israel, demonstrating disregard for the lives of the soldiers under the king's command, while the nation relies on his circumspection and judgment. In the most general sense, David has committed a sin against God by ignoring one of the commandments of the Torah, as well as Divine Providence.

His repentance must therefore include all three dimensions: he must repent for what he did to one individual; he must repent for the disdain for human life reflected in his actions; and he must repent for his dishonor against God as manifest in his sin.

David's response to the words of the prophet is indeed a speedy and impressive admission of guilt, but it acknowledges only the third aspect of the

¹¹ See Herzberg, *Samuel*, p. 314; Bar Efrat, *Samuel*, p. 122; Simon, *Reading Prophetic*, p. 147. The brevity of David's confession is especially noteworthy in comparison to Saul's confession in 1 Sam 15.

repentance which is required of him—"I have sinned unto God" (12:13),¹² and is therefore insufficient. In order for his repentance to include the first two aspects too, more time and additional actions are required. Hence the death of his son, as foretold by the prophet Nathan, following seven days of suffering. This punishment will help arouse David's consciousness to the repentance required of him in all three areas.

I propose that the description of David's behavior during the child's illness and following his death hint at his process of repentance.

a. Firstly, let us analyze how the text hints at the atonement for David's sin against the individual—Uriah the Hittite.

Let us compare the description of Uriah's actions after David spoke with him, with the description of David's own actions during his son's illness.¹³

David besought God for the child, and David fasted, and went in and lay all night upon the ground. And the elders of his house arose and went to him to raise him up from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat bread with them. (12:16-17)

More of his activities come to light retroactively, after he is informed of his son's death:

And David arose from the ground and washed and anointed himself, and changed his garments (12:20).

And David comforted Bathsheba, his wife, and he went to her and lay with her . . . (12:24).

It is clear from these verses that David afflicted himself in four different areas: he "lay upon the ground" (12:16), rather than where he would usually recline; he refrained from eating (12:16-17); from washing and anointing himself and changing his garments—all of which he does only after he is made aware of the child's death (12:20); and he refrains from marital relations with his wife—this too occurs only after he comforts her over the death of the infant (12:24).

Uriah the Hittite had previously afflicted himself in the same four areas:

¹² Abarbanel explains that David says only "I have sinned unto God" because there is no human being whom he can appease: Uriah is dead, Bathsheba is not in need of appeasement, and the nation is unaware of his sin.

¹³ On the criteria for and definitions of analogy, see recently: J. Berman, *Narrative Analogy in the Hebrew Bible: Battle Stories and their Equivalent Non-Battle Narratives* (VTS 103; Leiden, 2004), pp. 7-18.

Uriah lay at the entrance to the king's house, with all his master's servants, and did not go down to his house (11:9)

And Uriah said to David: The Ark, and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my master Joab and my master's servants are encamped in the open field; shall I then come to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I shall not do this thing. (11:11)

Uriah did not sleep at home, but rather at the entrance to the king's house; he did not eat; he refrained from going to wash and to change his garments at home, even though he had come from a journey ("Have you not come from a journey?"—11:10); and refrains from marital relations with his wife.¹⁴

The analogy between David's actions and those of Uriah would seem to indicate that David's conduct, during his son's illness, demonstrates identification with his victim. This identification is part of the process of repentance which David must undergo before his sin can be forgiven. David's self-affliction in the same areas as those previously associated with Uriah is his atonement for his sin against Uriah.

b. Let us now see how the text hints at David's atonement for his disregard for the lives of those subservient to him. David's decision to have Uriah killed represents a blow to the nation and disregard for human life, since Uriah—like every soldier in his army—is subject to the king's authority and his life rests in the king's hands. The epitome of David's disregard for the lives of his subjects is reflected in his words to the messenger sent by Joab with the news of those who have fallen in battle:

David said to the messenger, So shall you say to Joab: 'Let this thing not displease you, for the sword devours one just like another; intensify your battle against the city and destroy it'—and encourage him. (11:25)

With these words David transmits his lack of concern and of consideration for the lives of the soldiers under his command. This failing must be corrected.

David's opportunity for atonement comes when it is the life of someone important to him—the son of Bathsheba—that is at stake. The child's illness had jolted him and forced him to rethink the importance of life. First, David tries to save the child's life in any way that he can: he lies upon the ground,

¹⁴ Parts of this analogy have previously been pointed out by Simon, *Reading Prophetic*, pp. 153-154, and Alter, *David*, p. 261.

desists from the pleasures of life, and turns to God in supplication. His actions reflect not only mourning but also prayer and beseeching.

One might argue that David's actions testify to his concern for the life of his own son, rather than necessarily reflecting any change in his attitude towards human life. In a similar way, when Joab and Abishai go out to fight their last battle against Absalom, David adjures them, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom" (1 Sam. 18:5). However, it is also possible that David's words following the child's death indicate a fundamental shift in his understanding of the significance of human life:

Now he is dead—why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not come back to me (12:23).

David understands that death is irreversible; the dead will not reappear among the living. In citing David's words after the child's death, the text hints at the change which has taken place in his thinking: he now understands the preciousness of life, in contrast to the disregard and lack of concern for human life which he had displayed in his treatment of Uriah.¹⁵

c. Thus far we have seen how the details of the story of the child's death hint at David's repentance for his sin against Uriah and his lack of concern for the lives of his subjects. However, David's repentance must also include the realm of his relationship with God. Admittedly, he has already confessed with the words, "I have sinned to God" (12:13), thereby acknowledging that he has disregarded and transgressed God's command. However, his actions as described in Chapter 11 show that he has not only disregarded God's command, but also believed that he could hide his sin from God. The fact that God's name is absent from Chapter 11, appearing for the first time only in its final verse, indicates the rift that has opened between God and the king. Indeed, some months have gone by since the sin; David has gathered Bathsheba to his house, she has borne him a son, and at this stage it seems that David views his plan as having been successful, with his actions producing no Divine response.

Nathan's mission to David (12:1-13) shows the king that nothing can be hidden from God. However, David must undergo a lengthy and profound process in order to internalize this message. The process of internalization is hinted at

¹⁵ The contrast between David's words to Joab in Chapter 11 and his words after the death of his son is noted by Fokkerman, *Narrative*, p. 91. According to Alter, *David*, p. 262, this is the first time in the Book of Samuel that David speaks from the depths of his heart, expressing his true feelings.

in the description of his son's illness. David invokes God at each stage of the crisis, both before the child's death and afterwards—in complete contrast to his actions at the time of the sin.

While the child is ill, David addresses God directly and asks that He change the decree, even though the prophet has informed him explicitly of the punishment awaiting him:

David besought God for the child . . . (12:16).

He does not suffice with this supplication, but also undertakes a self-imposed fast in order to arouse God's compassion:

David fasted and went in and lay all night upon the ground (12:16).

The first thing that he does after the child's death is to go and prostrate himself in God's House:

David arose from the ground and washed and anointed himself, and changed his garments, and came into the House of God, and prostrated himself, and came into his own house, and asked for bread to be set for him, and he ate (12:20).

Attention should be paid to the order of David's actions: He arises, washes and anoints himself, and changes his garments. But before going to his own house to eat, he first goes to God's House—the site of the Sanctuary—and prostrates himself before God.¹⁶

In his words to his servants David once again emphasizes his efforts to communicate with God:

For I said, Who knows—perhaps God will be gracious to me and the child will live (12:22).

Thus, throughout the child's illness and also after his death, David is highly conscious of God. This acute awareness represents a correction for the deficiency revealed in his sin: David is no longer ignoring God; rather, he turns to Him and has internalized His constant presence and watchfulness.

¹⁶ My impression is that the washing and changing of garments prior to his visit to God's House likewise indicate honor towards God. See Radak (v. 20). Concerning the various possibilities for understanding the term "God's House" in this verse, see M. Avioz, "He went into the House of the Lord and prostrated himself: Where did David Go?", *Shnaton* 18 (2008), pp. 3-11 (Heb).

This explanation, I believe, sheds light on the role of the servants as secondary characters in the story. The servants highlight the difference between David's behavior prior to the death of his son and afterwards. They had assumed, erroneously, that David's behavior expressed his anguished psychological state owing to his son's illness, and therefore it would be reasonable to posit that after the child died, his state would deteriorate further, and he would "do himself harm" (verse 18)—taking his mourning to an extreme, and perhaps even committing suicide.¹⁷

The partial perspective of the servants serves to highlight the complete perspective of David himself. His actions arise not only from emotional agony, but also from his religious consciousness and an understanding of God's power. David fights for the life of his child, by turning directly to God. The servants, unaware that the child's illness is the result of David's sin, interpret his actions within the human dimension of distress and mourning, and they expect this to intensify with the news of the child's death. David, in contrast, is aware that his son's illness is the result of his own sin, and his actions arise from the religious realm; they reflect the religious stages of recognition of God's actions, regret, and repentance. After the child has died, when David understands that his appeal to God was not successful, he accepts the decree with love and submission.¹⁸

This interpretation solves all the questions which we posed at the outset. Even after David's verbal confession, his young son must still die. David's actions and words during the seven days of the child's illness hint at his process of repentance. His servants, as secondary characters, illuminate his inner transformation as a penitent.

In summary, in this article I propose that the main contribution of the story of the death of David's child is its exposure of his inner world following the revelation of his sin by the prophet Nathan. It must be emphasized that the text records no direct comment by David concerning the injustice which he caused. However, the biblical narrative often conveys its ideas and messages in an indirect manner, through various literary devices. By means of analogies, discrepancies between descriptions, and secondary characters, the text hints

¹⁷ Polzin suggests that what the servants fear is not that David will harm himself, but rather that he will harm them, the bearers of the tragic news. See Polzin, *David*, p. 128.

¹⁸ As noted above (n. 4) David's conduct during the child's illness is usually understood solely as the observance of mourning customs, and therefore the cessation of this "mourning" is difficult to explain. According to the interpretation proposed above, David was battling for the life of his son, and once the child had died there was no point in continuing his efforts. See also McCarter, *Samuel*, p. 301.

at David's process of repentance for his sin. We might say that David undergoes a process in two stages: Initially, immediately after the speech by the prophet Nathan, he demonstrates a repentance that is quick and spontaneous, but only partial. Thereafter he undergoes a process of gradual repentance that is more profound, and in which he atones for all the levels of his sin. His actions prior to the child's death hint at his atonement for the private sin which he committed against Uriah. His words following the death hint at atonement for his sin against the nation—his disregard for the lives of those subservient to him. His actions and statements both prior to the death and afterwards hint at atonement for his sin in putting God out of his mind.

It is only after David has undergone both stages of this repentance and corrected all the deficiencies revealed by his sin, that the text describes God's reconciliation with him:

And he named him Shelomo, and God loved him;
And He sent by the hand of Nathan, the prophet, and he called his name Jedidiah,
for God.

Thus, David's process of atonement is complete.

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