



Scenes from the Old Testament

David and Bathsheba

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2 Samuel 11: 1–17, 26–27 Matthew 1: 1–6

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–69), *Bathsheba at her bath* (1654), Louvre, Paris.¹

The scene that Rembrandt presents in his painting isn't drawn directly from the text of the first lesson. In the text, David from his roof top spies a woman at her bath, a beautiful woman, and enquires after her. He is told that she is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. And then, as our version had it, 'David sent messengers, and took her'.

Rembrandt has invented a moment between these two events – between the king's lustful gaze and his imperious action; between Bathsheba being seen and desired, and her being taken and possessed. In this imagined moment she is still at her bath and distractedly holding a letter.

No such letter is mentioned in the story. In fact there is only one specifically identified letter in the whole of the tale. There are lots of messengers and lots of messages. David sends someone – a messenger – to find out who is the woman on whom he has spied. He sends messengers to get her. She sends to him to tell him she is pregnant. He sends a messenger to Joab, the commander at the front, ordering him to send Uriah back to Jerusalem. Eventually, messengers come back from the front, with news of Uriah's death. And messengers will go to Bathsheba, when her period of mourning is over, to fetch her into the king's house. But the one and only letter which is specifically mentioned in the narrative is the letter which David himself wrote, Uriah's death sentence, the letter which told the commander Joab to be sure to set Uriah 'in the forefront of the hottest battle', and then to pull back, 'that he may be smitten and die' – which letter, Uriah himself carries back to the front when he had failed to comply with David's plan A, which had been to have Uriah sleep with his wife and thus to cover up her otherwise inexplicable and soon to be embarrassing pregnancy.

So why has Rembrandt chosen to imagine this particular moment given the many other options? Why has he settled on imagining and depicting Bathsheba, still at her bath, distractedly clutching an imagined letter giving notice, we suppose, of the king's imperious command? Because, so I want to suggest, it allows him, and invites us to look compassionately on Bathsheba in her predicament, and to see in her predicament something of our predicament, a human predicament, which is also in fact the object of divine compassion.

¹ <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/bathsheba-her-bath>

In the long tradition of portraying this story the most popular moment to depict is the one from which the story begins – when David, tarrying in Jerusalem even though it is well past the time when ‘kings go forth to battle’, takes the evening air on his rooftop and oversees Bathsheba washing. In pictures in this tradition – such as a famous picture by Rubens – Bathsheba’s nakedness constitutes an invitation to the viewer to reprise the moment on the rooftop. We are invited to gaze on Bathsheba as David gazed upon her, as a beautiful object. In these pictures – you will have to take my word for it, since I thought that one nude on the service sheet was probably enough, without giving you ten others with which you could make the comparison – Bathsheba is typically shown beautifying herself, making herself ready to receive, or to elicit, a desirous gaze. She will often have a flirtatious look of her face, inviting the viewer to notice how very desirable she is.

Rembrandt’s Bathsheba, however, issues no such invitation – she doesn’t meet our eye, and she isn’t preparing herself for our attention. She is not busily readying herself, but is deeply unavailable, brooding and oblivious to our or any other presence. She looks through, rather than at, the woman attending to her. The earliest description of the picture we have, dating from 1811, notes that Bathsheba’s ‘countenance is clouded with ... melancholy forebodings’, as if she already senses what woeful consequences will result from the toxic combination of a man’s lust and king’s power. We, knowing how the story will unfold, see the letter in her hand as a reference to the only letter the story actually mentions, David’s letter of death for Uriah. But whatever the letter in the picture is supposed to say, Bathsheba already, so her countenance tells us, has a premonition of the sorry consequences to which her royal summons may lead. And Bathsheba’s self-absorbed melancholy mood does not invite us to look on her with desire – her countenance invites not our lust, but our empathy for her predicament.

Rembrandt, that most compassionate of painters, looks compassionately upon Bathsheba, rescuing her from reprising the very role which she had in that fateful moment in her history, as a thing to be desired, an object to be lusted after. We might say this although his Bathsheba is obviously naked, she is not a nude – her nakedness is a token of her vulnerability, not a marker of her willing availability. It is the nakedness to which Job refers, when he rends his garments and declares ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I leave the world.’ (Job 1.21) Bathsheba is naked in the sense that one is naked before naked power. Rembrandt’s Bathsheba is not so much an object, as abject.

Bathsheba’s predicament is of course, particular to her, but not only particular to her. It is, in a way, our predicament, a human predicament, for she is caught, if you like, in the force field of desires which are pretty much part and parcel of the human condition. I make this point, in brief, when I conduct weddings by beginning with either or both of a story and an interesting statistic. The story is about friends of mine who left Oxford to work in Matabeleland in Zimbabwe where they were married by the Bishop. The said Bishop began the wedding by saying that on the whole he preferred conducting funerals to weddings because he thought that the participants in funerals had a greater hope of future bliss. You are kind enough to have laughed – but if I don’t get a laugh at a wedding with that story, I assume that the congregation hasn’t quite got the point, so I go for the jugular by remarking upon the rather telling statistic that if you are murdered in this country, the chances are it will be by your spouse.

The lust of kings may be a particularly deadly form of lust, but the predicament of Bathsheba, the death of Uriah, the wickedness of David, flow from wants and desires which are human, not just regal. And Rembrandt, so I think, invites us to contemplate not just Bathsheba's plight, but a wider human predicament, and to notice the divine compassion with which this human predicament is viewed and which is hidden in plain view in the picture. This is concealed and revealed within the play of light within this picture, which is no mere play but here constitutes Rembrandt's meditation on the light and dark of human life and on the mystery of divine salvation.

The first light of this picture is the bright and warm light which mysteriously falls on Bathsheba's naked body. It seems to be the bright warm light of morning – as it might be the bright warm light of Eden, when Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed. Rembrandt's nudes were criticised – this his last great nude included – for not conforming to the expectations of the classical tradition. As one early critic complained, 'he chose no Greek Venus as his model, but rather a washerwoman or a treader of peat from a barn, and called this whim "imitation of nature".' Certainly there is no idealising here – Bathsheba is a woman of flesh and blood, not a size zero super model – very probably in fact Rembrandt's common law wife. Bathsheba, in her pitiable dismay, may not invite our lustful gaze, but neither is she concealed from view but placed in the clear light of day, a woman who is desired and desirable – her nudity as seemingly innocent and unabashed as that of Eden.

But if Bathsheba sits in a bright warm light, behind her is the deep though not yet wholly impenetrable gloom found in so many of Rembrandt's late paintings. These shadows speak not of the innocence of Eden, but of the dark dealings which are shortly to engulf Bathsheba and Uriah. Out there in the darkness is David who imperiously summons Bathsheba, the messengers he will despatch to take her, the commander who will execute David's death sentence on Uriah – out there, are those curiously imperious and compelling desires which entangle human life and human relationships, and which provide the material for the gallows humour I like to bring to a celebration of a wedding. Beyond the bright light of Eden, nakedness is not unashamed and innocent, but is implicated in the entanglements of human relationships and affairs.

But besides the brightness of day and the darkness of night, there is one other light. Besides the golden light of Eden, and the deep darkness which overshadows it, there is the shady half-light which illuminates the figure who attends to Bathsheba and washes her feet.

The picture we are looking at is in the Louvre. Up the road a bit, in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, there is a small drawing by Rembrandt of Christ washing the disciples' feet, a scene he had drawn on other occasions – this drawing done very probably within the year in which he painted Bathsheba. The washing of Bathsheba's feet, like the letter in Bathsheba's hand, is a gratuitous addition to the story – but of course, not gratuitous, since here it connects Bathsheba explicitly with Christ – with whom she will be connected by descent. We heard as our second lesson, a portion of the genealogy of Christ, as it is recounted in Matthew's Gospel – a genealogy which starts with Abraham, and will be traced very specifically through David the King, 'that begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Uriah'. Solomon is not the child born to David and Bathsheba as a result of their first, illicit liaison – that child dies, notwithstanding David's fasting and prayer.

But as Bathsheba mourns this further death – the death of the one whose life had spelt death to Uriah her husband – David comforts her, and she bares another child, Solomon, from whom will come the generations down to Joseph, 'the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ' – as Matthew's genealogy concludes.

But she is not just connected to Christ in the future, by descent. She is mysteriously connected to him, even in her present, so the picture says, as she is washed. Bathsheba, in this picture, does not belong securely in the light. Her predicament is just that the light in which she sits is imperilled and threatened by the surrounding darkness, the darkness with accounts for her melancholy and foreboding. Between the light and the darkness there is no obvious resolution. It is only in the shadowy figure washing her feet that there is found any hope for her and humankind in the same predicament – the hope in her descendant, who will 'gird himself with a towel', as John tells it, to wash the disciples feet, signifying the cleansing of heart and soul at which his life of service for mankind aims, and which, so we believe, it accomplishes. That figure is in the twilight – as hope, being hope, so often does belong in twilight. But Rembrandt who looks on the human condition with abundant compassion, points us in this picture to a greater compassion, the divine compassion, hidden in the future, and yet present even now. In that memorably laconic, perhaps sardonic, final line of Chapter 12 we hear one judgment on this tale – 'But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.' But it is not, it seems a final word. For within God's mercy, the entanglement of the compromised Bathsheba with the compromising David is, as it turns out, a scene of divine redemption.

And what of our entanglements? You'll be glad to know, if you had any thought of inviting me to preach at your wedding, that I try not to leave matters with the story of the Bishop who preferred funerals to nuptials, or with that interesting statistic about the most likely perpetrator of your murder, should you be murdered that is. I go on to say that while gooey-eyed romanticism is not Christian doctrine, Christian marriage is ventured hopefully because ventured under the compassionate eye of God, who overrules the sins and failures of human kind, drawing from our entanglements his redemptive purposes. The final word on human marriage is not the Bishop's remark, nor those statistics – but rather the word, Jesus Christ, whose presence at and in Christian marriage holds the darkness at bay and summons us towards the clear light of Eden.