

Essay Two — David and Bathsheba
“Sacred King David”

Russell J Lowke, November 20th, 2001.

Henry King's 1951 film, *David and Bathsheba*, although true to the flavor of the Bible, is misleading, containing, in the words of Joseph Roquemore, "scattered historical distortions."¹ Director King appeals to an audience of the 1950s that panders to love-scandal, in which the story of Bathsheba has plenty. In a crime of passion, King David takes Bathsheba, the wife of his virtuous officer Uriah, for his own, thereby committing adultery; later, when Bathsheba states "I am with child,"² King David kills Uriah by sending him to his death in battle against the Ammonites. This act adds murder of the innocent to his sins. Nevertheless, the Bible clearly deems King David sacred — he is hero of the Lord of Israel and its greatest monarch (only Moses holds higher standing). In order to maintain hero-David in a favorable light, director King takes extensive liberties with the story, the most outrageous distortion being the portrayal of Uriah as a militant fanatic who has no interest in his wife Bathsheba.

Director King draws all conjecture about Uriah's personality from a Biblical passage stating that Uriah refused to sleep with Bathsheba while the army was campaigning. Uriah vows to King David, "...my lord Jo'ab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing."³ There is no Biblical evidence to suggest Uriah and Bathsheba's marriage was unhappy. Regardless, Director King creates a Uriah who is war obsessed and devoid of all interest in his wife, content to allow her to live a life of loneliness and celibacy. Bathsheba morosely relates that, of her seven months marriage, she has seen her husband for only the six days subsequent to their wedding. After the adultery, when King David questions Uriah about his neglect of Bathsheba, Uriah is harsh and unfeeling saying, "A woman's wishes cannot conflict with her husband, that is the lore." To this King David further presses, "Would you condemn your own wife?" Uriah replies, "I would not hesitate to do my duty sire." The seriousness of the issue is emphasized by a scene showing the stoning of a young woman; King David stops to ask what the commotion is about and is told, "Adulteress, Sire. She betrayed her husband in the arms of another; judged condemned under law."

In grand deliverance of Uriah's portrayal as a fanatic, Director King has Uriah wanting to glorify himself in battle, requesting of King David that he set him "in the forefront of the hottest

¹ Roquemore, Joseph, *History goes to the Movies*, (New York: Broadway, 1999):25.

² 2nd Samuel.11.5

³ 2nd Samuel.11.11

battle... that he may serve his king to the utmost” — thus inviting his own death. We are presented with such a one-sided picture of Uriah that consequently the image of King David becomes that of loving protector of Bathseba, rather than an adulterer and murderer. Uriah’s combat eagerness is the obvious vehicle with which to slay Uriah, and King David issues the order adding “...it is his own wish... even his own words... [but] retire from him that he may be smitten and die.” The Bible suggests no such thing, the actual situation being quite the opposite, King David even contrives to have his order delivered using Uriah’s own hand and we read: “David wrote a letter to Jo’ab, and sent it by the hand of Uri’ah. In the letter he wrote, ‘Set Uri’ah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die.’”⁴

After Uriah’s death the Bible says that “David sent and brought her [Bathsheba] to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.”⁵ By the laws of Moses King David should have been executed;⁶ however, King David is blessed with forgiveness and Divine judgment falls instead upon Bathsheba’s child. The Bible tells us that priest Nathan relays the verdict declaring, “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.”⁷ There is also a curse placed upon David’s family, but beyond this, no more is specifically said. Conversely, Director King dramatizes the scene of Nathan's verdict, having it occur only after the calamities of drought, and famine befalling Israel, these brought about by King David’s and Bathsheba’s sin. In response, the crowd accuses Bathsheba with cries “...she has brought about the wraith of God upon Israel” and “...the woman must expiate her sin.” The Israeli people demand justice to appease God. Bathsheba is to be stoned. King David attempts suicide at the hands of God by touching the ark (a fallacy suggested in the movie⁸) and is instead rewarded with a drought breaking rain — a sign that God has forgiven him. With this priest Nathan concludes, “No man can ever hope to know the real nature of God, but he has given us a glimpse of his faith.” None of this happens in the Bible, although there are unrelated famines,

⁴ 2nd Samuel 11.14

⁵ 2nd Samuel.11.26

⁶ According to the idea of the lex talionis (law of exact retaliation, Ex.21.23-25; Lev.24.19-21;Dt.19.21) David should have died - *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: 1973):389 (footnotes).

⁷ 2nd Samuel 12.9

⁸ The film has priest Nathan speaking of the ark “do not tempt the thunderbolts of the Lord... to touch it is to die.” Although the ark was thought to smite Gods enemies its effect is not immediate. The ark was even captured and dragged away at one point, the Bible telling us in 1st Samuel 4.10 that “the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated... and the ark of God was captured.”

drought and plague during King David's time.

Regardless of King David's various sins, of which the tale of Bathsheba is the most onerous, he is always held in the highest of esteem. His prestige is confirmed in the New Testament, his legacy is both the foundation of Christianity, and the legitimacy of Islam. This tradition is very much perpetuated in the movie *David and Bathsheba*; the oft quoted notion that "history is written by the victors" holds true. Historically, David was the king of Israel, and as such was capable of sidestepping charges of murder and adultery — particularly when he wields the pardon of God.

Bibliography

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