

“Women of the Bible: Bathsheba & Jezebel”

2 Samuel 12:1-7a ¹

I began preparation for this sermon thinking that there would be such a shortage of material on the women in question that I'd be able to easily cover two in one morning . . . but, as is frequently the case after such a beginning, I ended up with far more material than can be used. We'll do the best we can.

Our subjects this morning are two of the most powerful women in the Bible. Both were queens of Israel, and both were primarily known for bad behavior. Bathsheba's story is notable for the redemption (of sorts) that came toward the end; Jezebel's story is notable for being wicked from start to finish.

There is a sense in which the moral of both stories is similar, and we'll come to that in the end. Before that, though, let's look at these two women in the order in which they lived.

Bathsheba. ² Bathsheba lived about 1,000 B. C. She was the daughter of Eliam, one of King David's Thirty Mighty Men, and she was the wife of Uriah, another of the Thirty Mighty Men (2 Samuel 23:34, 39). Her grandfather, Eliam's father, was Ahithophel, one of David's Chief Advisors (2 Samuel 15:12).

This means that Bathsheba came from an elite family. It's as though she was the daughter of an Army General, was married to an Army General, and was the granddaughter of Israel's Secretary of State. And all of this means that she and the king were very likely acquainted prior to the event that begins our story.

That story begins in the springtime, “*the time when kings go off to war*” (2 Samuel 11:1). David had been king for quite a while, and was a renowned warrior, but on this occasion he chose to leave the rigors of battle to Joab, the General who was his “Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.” The text sets up the story by being implicitly critical of David's laziness, and takes pains to point out that what followed took place one evening after David had been lounging around in bed all day.

Like the rich frequently do today, kings typically built their palaces on hilltops where they had commanding views of the countryside as well as being easier to defend. As he walked about the roof of his palace looking out over the city, David noticed a beautiful woman bathing in the city below. The text does not suggest that the woman was acting in an immodest way, but it does take pains to say that she was purifying herself from her menses. From this information we know two things: that this woman was not currently pregnant; and that she was probably in the most fertile days of her cycle.

As is the case with many temptations in life, we may not be able to help the first look, which comes unbidden, but we can certainly help the second and subsequent looks . . . although David didn't. He looked long and lustily, but because of the distance and the fact that binoculars hadn't been invented, he couldn't tell who she was. David sent messengers to find out who this beautiful woman was, with a view to inviting her to the palace for a bit of frolic.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 7, 2016.

² The story of Bathsheba appears in 2 Samuel 11-12; 1 Kings 1-2; and 1 Chronicles 3:5. Interestingly, the Chronicler omits the seduction/betrayal, which may have been the underlying dynamic behind Ahithophel's betrayal of David with Absalom many years later.

The answer came back that this was Bathsheba, the wife of one of David's Generals. So now David knew not only who she was, but that he already knew her, at least in passing. He also knew that her military husband was out of town, doing battle that the king should have been supervising. Shamefully, he proceeded with his invitation, and she accepted it.

Some want to say that Bathsheba had no choice but to come to the palace and acquiesce to the king's desire; but it seems to me that she was well-placed enough and powerful enough to have refused had she wished to do so. Whatever the case, before too long she sent word to the king that she was pregnant.

Wishing to cover his tracks, David sent word to Joab to send Uriah back from the battlefield for an audience with the king. It was David's plan to send Uriah home for the night, expecting him to be intimate with his wife, and thereby creating plausible deniability about this child's origins.

Uriah, however, was ahead of the king. There would have been no way for his wife to visit the king without the palace guards knowing about it, not to mention the gossips who are to be found in every small town. Uriah likely knew exactly what was going on, and he refused to become the king's pawn, nobly saying that he could not enjoy the pleasures of home while his comrades in arms were in the battlefield.

If Uriah knew or suspected this much, though, it's hard to understand why he followed through with the delivery of the king's letter to Joab as he returned to battle. Why didn't he suspect the treachery contained within? Whatever the case, Uriah did deliver the letter, which instructed Joab to see to it that Uriah died in battle, and that quickly. And it was so.

Bathsheba mourned her husband, though we don't know how earnestly, and then returned to the palace to become the king's wife and to deliver the king's son, who died a week later. It was after all this took place that the encounter reported by our text took place.

The prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin, and, to his credit, David repented with anguish. Many scholars believe that David wrote Psalms 51 and 32 as expressions of his anguish, his repentance, and God's forgiveness. While God does indeed forgive when we repent, God's forgiveness neither negates nor removes the consequences of our sin, and the rest of David's life was pretty much destroyed as a result of this immorality . . . but that's a story for another day.

David and Bathsheba had another son not too long afterward, whom they named Solomon.³ Solomon grew up, and Bathsheba, now older but still having considerable influence over the old and feeble king, contrived to have the throne passed to her son instead of to David's oldest son (Adonijah, from a different mother), and then maneuvered to help Solomon secure his throne.

Solomon and his mother were apparently very close, and he installed her as Israel's first "Queen Mother" (1 Kings 2:19). This suggests that, over the years, Bathsheba's life was transformed from immorality and betrayal to wisdom and leadership. Indeed, she is thought by some to have written what we know as Proverbs 31 as a wedding gift for Solomon. It would be most interesting were that to be the case, because that poem ends like this: "*Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*"

While the Bible clearly blames David for their initial sin (1 Kings 15:5), it's interesting that Bathsheba is never blamed for it. And, even as David celebrated God's forgiveness in Psalms 32

³ Bathsheba also bore Shimea, Shobub, and Nathan to David.

and 51, Bathsheba apparently received God's forgiveness, too, because she is one of just four women who appear in the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of the New Testament (Matthew 1:6). She may have begun poorly, but she ended well.⁴ So we turn to Jezebel

Jezebel.⁵ Jezebel! Like Bathsheba, her name conjures images of immorality and intrigue, but the Bible views Jezebel as exponentially more evil than Bathsheba ever was. There is no happy ending here. Indeed, it might be said that Jezebel was a forerunner of such characters as Judas, Lady Macbeth and Darth Vader . . . except, of course, that Jezebel and Judas were not fictional figures. She may even have been C. S. Lewis's inspiration for Jadis, the cruel queen of Narnia.

Like Bathsheba, Jezebel was well-connected. Her father, Ethbaal, was king of the Phoenician city of Sidon, and her husband, Ahab, was king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the ninth century, B.C.

Although the Phoenicians were a great maritime nation, they were also idolaters who viewed the God of Israel as no more than a local deity, no more important than one of their own gods. And, as Naaman would later see Israel's Jordan River as but a poor cousin to what he regarded as the magnificent rivers of his own land, so Jezebel regarded the God of Israel as contemptible in comparison with Baal, the chief god of the Phoenicians.

Jezebel may even have been named for Baal, as her father was. Scholars think her name means "Where is the prince?" a ritual cry from worship ceremonies during periods of the year when Baal was considered to be in the underworld.

Although the Phoenicians were at times the bitter enemies of Israel, in Jezebel's day the Phoenicians were on friendly terms with Israel, and her marriage to Ahab represented a political alliance between the two nations. The marriage was most likely arranged by their two fathers in order to perpetuate friendly relations into the next generation of royals.

Whether for political or religious reasons, or both, it was Jezebel's goal to completely replace the worship of Yahweh with the worship of Baal throughout the land of Israel. She did her best to round up and execute all of the prophets of the Lord God, while importing hundreds of priests of Baal and Asherah, his consort, from her homeland.

As it has been handed down to us, Jezebel's story took place in three major scenes: (1) the confrontation on Mt. Carmel; (2) the matter of Naboth's vineyard; and (3) her denouement. Let's look at each briefly.

Scene One: Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-46). As we come to one of the Bible's most famous scenes, Jezebel had been at the business of stamping out the worship of the One True God for some time. God had judged the wickedness of the land with a three-year drought, and now the prophet Elijah called the nation to Mt. Carmel for a "showdown at the OK Corral."

⁴ For more information: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bathsheba>;
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Bathsheba>;
<http://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2008/01/25/bathsheba-is-one-of-the-most-beguiling-characters-in-the-bible>;
<http://www.womeninthebible.net/women-bible-women/bathsheba/>;
<http://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2008/01/25/bathsheba-is-one-of-the-most-beguiling-characters-in-the-bible>

⁵ The story of Jezebel appears in 1 Kings 16-22; 2 Kings 9; and Revelation 2:20.

You know the story. The 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah shouted and cut themselves all day long, but their imaginary gods made no response. Elijah then built an altar to Yahweh, had the sacrifice and the wood drowned with water, and then called upon the Lord God—just once—to light the fire. Fire instantly blazed from heaven, consuming not only the animal and the wood, but also the rocks and the water!

Elijah had the 850 false prophets killed in the Kishon Valley, and word of this slaughter soon reached Jezebel. At this point she made the first statement that Scripture records from her lips. She sent word to Elijah, “*May the gods strike me and kill me if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you just as you have killed them*” (1 Kings 19:2).

Even after such an astounding victory, Elijah was terrified and ran for his life, ending up on Sinai, the Mountain of God, where he encountered God in the famous “earthquake, wind, and fire” event . . . but that’s another story altogether. Time passed, as time will do, and Jezebel appeared again in what was perhaps her most nefarious scene

Scene Two: Naboth’s Vineyard (1 Kings 21). Mayors, Governors, Presidents and Despots all like to engage in building projects that will endure after their terms have ended, and Kings have similar inclinations. So it was that Ahab wanted to enlarge his palace gardens, and in order to do this, he tried to purchase land that adjoined the royal lands. One of these adjoining parcels belonged to a man named Naboth. It was his ancestral property, handed down from generation to generation since the conquest of Canaan centuries before.

Although it surely must have been intimidating for the king to desire his property, Naboth was entirely within his rights to refuse to sell.⁶ Ahab knew this, and he went home and sulked, even refusing to eat.

Noticing her husband’s ill temper, and inquiring about its source, Jezebel took over. While Ahab may have been constrained by the Mosaic Law, Jezebel felt no such constraint. She was accustomed to autocratic and absolute power, and she told her husband, “I will get you the vineyard.”

Jezebel’s ruthless reputation must have been similar to that of the Russian KGB, because when she told the “Mayor” and “City Council” to drum up false charges against Naboth and see to it that he was lynched, they apparently raised no objection to murdering a righteous man whose family they had known for generations. Naboth was murdered, and Ahab got the vineyard.

After this “police brutality” event, God sent the prophet Elijah to Ahab to announce that both Ahab and Jezebel would come to bloody deaths. Ahab was killed in battle not long after, and their son, Joram, became king.

Scene Three: Jezebel and Jehu (2 Kings 9:30-37). The prophet Elisha had now succeeded Elijah as God’s representative in Israel, and by God’s command, Elisha sent instructions to Jehu, the General in command of Israel’s army, that he was to undertake a divinely-ordained *coup d’état*. Jehu was to kill Joram, cutting off Ahab’s lineage, and then he was to kill Jezebel, who, like Bathsheba before her, had become the powerful Queen Mother. After these things were accomplished, Jehu himself was to become King.

Obedying the prophet’s instructions, Jehu shot Joram with an arrow as he fled assassination, and, in ironic symbolism, he had Joram’s body thrown into the field that had once

⁶ See Numbers 27:5-11 as an example of this.

belonged to Naboth. Making his way to the palace, Jehu encountered Jezebel, who was seated in queenly fashion in an upstairs window.

As the daughter, wife, mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother of kings, Jezebel well knew that she was not going to survive this bloody *coup*. At the same time, rather than running away, she composed herself, fixed her hair and her makeup, and determined to go out of this life “every inch a queen.”

Jehu called for the palace servants to throw Jezebel out the window, which they did, and then Jehu ran over her with his horses and chariot, leaving her body for the dogs to eat. Not a pretty picture to end with, I know.⁷

So what do we make of all this? I’m going to end with an illustration that I hope doesn’t trivialize what we’ve seen in Bathsheba and Jezebel. It’s from *Veggie Tales*, and it makes the point that I think both of our queens had in common. The story goes like this

In *Veggie Tales*’ “King George and the Duck,” Larry the Cucumber stars as King George and Bob the Tomato is his faithful servant, Lewis. The privileges of royalty—kingdom expansion, castles, power, and treasures—do not appeal to King George. But King George does dearly love to bathe with his special rubber duck. Splishing and splashing, he sings an ode to his rubber duck called, appropriately, “I Love My Duck.”

One day while he is standing on the royal balcony in his purple robe and golden crown, King George peers through binoculars, and his eyes grow wide with desire. He spies something wonderful—a rubber duck. But this duck belongs to Billy, who happens to be bathing with his rubber duck on his own balcony. Billy’s rubber duck looks exactly like King George’s rubber duck. There is absolutely no difference between them. Nonetheless, the king covets Billy’s duck, exclaiming, “I want that duck!”

Faithful Lewis reminds the king that he already has a duck and that the other duck belongs to someone else.

“Are you saying I shouldn’t have whatever I want?” asks the King, incredulously.

Lewis opens a large wardrobe overflowing with hundreds of identical rubber ducks and says, “If I could just jog your memory, your majesty, you already have quite a lot of ducks.”

King George shoots a condescending look at his servant and replies, “Those are yesterday’s ducks.”⁸

Yesterday’s ducks. David had wives aplenty and concubines by the dozens, if not by the hundreds. But those were “yesterday’s ducks.” Ahab had properties beyond counting and acres beyond reckoning, but those were “yesterday’s ducks.” Bathsheba and Jezebel had power and

⁷ Jezebel makes one more cameo appearance, in Revelation 2:20, where her name becomes the personification of wickedness, immorality, and idolatry. See also:
<http://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2008/01/25/jezebel-was-a-killer-and-prostitute-but-she-had-her-good-side>;
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jezebel>;
<http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/>;
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Jezebel-No-1>

⁸ *King George and the Duck* (Big Ideas, 2000), not rated, written by Jennifer Combs, directed by Mike Nawrocki.

influence, but they wanted more. None of the protagonists in these stories were satisfied with “yesterday’s ducks.” They wanted more . . . and then more . . . and then more.

As we bring all this together, these stories are painful illustrations of the truths represents by the Tenth Commandment: “*You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey [or his duck], or anything that belongs to your neighbor*” (Exodus 20:17).⁹ But it’s bigger than this.

On this side of Holy Week, you and I know—if we’re paying attention—that the things of this earth, though they are often wonderful in their own ways, are not able to satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. As Jesus said to the woman at Jacob’s Well, “*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*” (John 4:13-14).

So how is it with you? Are you still chasing “yesterday’s ducks”? Have you found Him who alone is your Life?

All my life long I had panted for a drink from some cool spring,
That I hoped would quench the burning of the thirst I felt within.

Feeding on the husks around me till my strength was almost gone,
Longed my soul for something better, only still to hunger on.

Poor I was, and sought for riches, something that would satisfy;
But the dust I gathered round me only mocked my soul’s sad cry.

Well of Water, ever springing, Bread of Life, so rich and free,
Untold wealth that never faileth, My Redeemer is to me.

Hallelujah! I have found Him, Whom my soul so long has craved!
Jesus satisfies my longings, through His blood I now am saved!¹⁰

⁹ See also Proverbs 27:20, 30:15-16; Ecclesiastes 5:10.

¹⁰ “Satisfied,” words by Clara T. Williams; music by Ralph E. Hudson.