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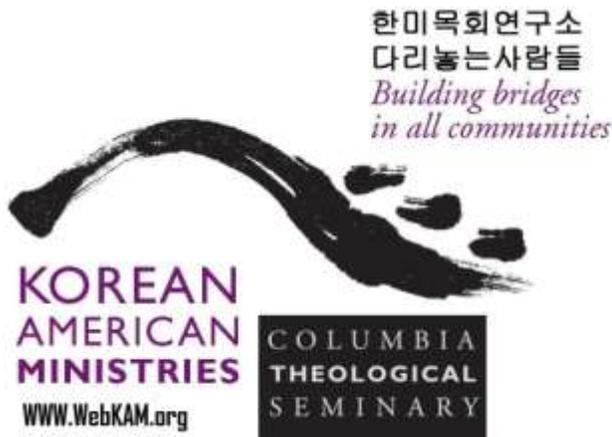
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## BIBLE

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## Reconsidering Bathsheba and Her Husband Uriah in Asian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Cheon<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to understand the story of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah in 2 Samuel 11 from the perspective of Asian culture. To do so, it attempts a comparative study between the biblical story and similar folktales in Asia, including the folktale of Domi from Korea and the narrative of Hanbing from China. After reviewing the three interpretations of the biblical story, according to which Bathsheba is considered as a victim, a seducer, or an ambiguous person. It develops the perspective that she was the victim of the king's adultery. This comparative study makes us understand the biblical story in the perspective of the powerless that produced and retold such folktales in the situation in which social injustice prevailed due to the rulers misusing their power.

It is argued that Bathsheba's story itself belongs to the narrative type of the king's taking a married woman from the powerless man, in which the king is considered as the wicked, whereas the victim as the just. That is, David is described as an immoral king, whereas Bathsheba and Uriah are presented as the just. As such Asian narratives are considered as a reflection of the immorality and injustice of the king and his society, the biblical story can be also considered as an implication of David's wickedness and his kingdom's immorality, as its following narratives show. In this regard, it is not simply a form of gossip, which deals with the king's private adultery, but a pivotal story within the "Court Narrative," which reveals the injustice of the king and his kingdom.

### Introduction

The story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 is one of the most tragic narratives in the Hebrew Bible. It narrates how a king cruelly destroyed the family of his royal soldier for his lust. Its characters, including David, Uriah, Bathsheba and Joab, were involved in this tragic event, by which their lives were seriously distorted and after which David's kingdom was constantly faced with the crisis through his family's trouble. The tragic story is the

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. Samuel Cheon is a Professor of Hannam University, Taejun, Korea, whose recent publication includes "Calvin's Biblical Interpretation and Its Understanding in Korean Church and Society," *Uniting Church Studies* 17/1 (2011/6), 87-96.

pivotal turning point in the narrative plot of the books of Samuel as well as in the whole David story.<sup>3</sup>

Though it presents one of the most crucial behaviors of King David, traditionally interpreters often tried to reduce his sin, negatively describing Bathsheba the object of his lust. For example, Matthew Henry, a biblical expositor of England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, portrayed in his commentary that David's lust was gratified after her consenting. Most of its recent interpreters follow such traditional view of Bathsheba, including biblical scholars, painters, writers and filmmakers<sup>4</sup>. For example, Randall Bailey described the marriage of David and Bathsheba in the view of a political scheme, considering her as his co-conspirator.<sup>5</sup> These interpretations show a tendency to regard Bathsheba as “a *femme fatale* who deliberately plots to become David's wife”<sup>6</sup> or a co-conspirator for the event, reflecting a male perspective. However, some recent interpreters questioned these male perspectives.<sup>7</sup> They regard Bathsheba as a victimized woman involuntarily involved in the event. On the other hand, others insist that the text is ambiguous.<sup>8</sup> It means that it is very difficult to decide whether she was a victim or a schemer. However, emphasizing the ambiguity of the ancient narrative, such interpreters tend to overlook the unexpressed voice and suffering of the powerless woman, and to keep up its interpretations suggested in the male perspective.

As we saw above, three kinds of interpretations have been produced concerning the story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. They describe Bathsheba as a seducer, a victim, or an ambiguous person. Though, among the interpretations, the suggestion that Bathsheba was

<sup>3</sup> W. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 271; R. Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 249.

<sup>4</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, “Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted,” *Semeia* 74 (1996), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989). Concerning David's political marriages, refer to Jon D. Levenson and Baruch Halpern, “The Political Import of David's Marriages,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99/4 (1980), 507-518.

<sup>6</sup> R. H. van der Bergh, “Is Bathsheba Guilty? The Septuagint's Perspective,” *Journal for Semitics* 17/1 (2008), 182.

<sup>7</sup> Exum, 51; Moshe Garsiel, “The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993), 261-262; R. M. Davidson, “Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17/2 (2006/Autumn), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Gale A. Yee, “Bathsheba,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 627; also refer to her article, “Fraught with Background: Literary Ambiguity in II Samuel 11,” *Interpretation* 42 (1988), 240-253; H. C. Paul Kim and M. Fulgence Nyengete, “Murder S/He Wrote? A Cultural and Psychological Reading of 2 Samuel 11-12,” in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible* (Semeia Studies 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 95-116.

victimized is preferred, and such view should be developed further in the Asian cultural perspective. This article will present an alternative interpretation in the Asian cultural perspective through the comparative study with similar stories in Asia.

### 1. Misunderstanding of the Story in Asia

As we saw above, the figure of Bathsheba has been negatively interpreted up to the present in Europe and North America. Such a negative view of her has been also developed in Asia from the cultural bias. First of all, her behavior of bathing in a place where someone could see her (II Sam 11:2) is censured. For example, Jongsoo Park insists that Bathsheba's such bathing cannot be understood by any possibility in the Korean sentiment and her chastity should be doubted.<sup>9</sup> He also indicates that, when her husband was in war, she would have to suppress such improper behavior by herself. This interpretation reflects the Korean traditional sentiment, in which woman is first censured in any incident of rape and her behavior is considered as provocative. It is a typical male perspective in the ancient Confucian society, in which man's responsibility of the sexual suppression is not seriously considered.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Bathsheba is censured because she did not commit suicide after the tragic event. According to the Korean Confucian ideology, a married woman should kill herself after being raped in order to prove her innocence and chastity. If not, she should be doubted whether she was involved in the adultery. This perspective implies that Bathsheba should be an adulterous woman, because she did not try to kill herself. However, it is not proper to apply this view into the biblical story reflecting the ancient Israelite culture, which did not require woman's death after being raped (2 Sam 16:20-22; 20:3; Cf. 2 Sam 3:7-10).

Thirdly, Bathsheba is doubted whether she intended to become David's queen through producing his son. Especially, her declaration "I am pregnant" (2 Sam 11:5) is misunderstood as her intention to become the queen. Of course, as Kim and Nyengele indicated, "...in the ancient Korean society, for a woman to have a royal child meant a

<sup>9</sup> Jongsoo Park, *Hebrew Narrative: Trans-cultural Understanding of the Bible in the Korean Context* (Seoul: The Wisdom Ground Press, 1995), 113 (in Korean).

<sup>10</sup> According to the book of Proverbs, even though another's wife initiates an illicit relationship with a man, he is responsible for such adulterous behavior, which results in the loss of his property and life, including his social death (6:20-35; 7:24-27).

great deal of fortune.”<sup>11</sup> However, as they mentioned, this view was applicable to only young unmarried girls in the ancient Confucian society. A king’s scandal with a married woman was condemned in the ancient Asian society even before the prevailing of Confucianism. Moreover, Confucianism prohibited such immoral relationship in a very strict way and required of the king a model life for such ideological morality.

Unlike the case of Bathsheba, unfortunately, David is positively interpreted in the perspective of Asian fatalism, according to which his sinful act is considered as a part of his uncontrollable fate. Combining with the doctrine of providence, this fatalism is accepted among Asian Christians without any criticism.<sup>12</sup> However, this immoral interpretation is not only to nullify the unjust behavior of David, but also to disregard the suffering of Bathsheba and the innocent death of Uriah.

On the other hand, Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite, the other powerless, is also overlooked in Asia, as in North America.<sup>13</sup> When they read the story in 2 Samuel 11, they hardly focus on the faithful soldier and his death, but mostly on David and Bathsheba. Moreover, he is considered even as an offender of the king’s order, but not as a keeper of the traditional rule and a protestor of his master’s unlawful demand. Consequently, his death is regarded as the result of his disobedience of the king’s command rather than as a protest of his master’s unlawful conduct. This interpretation reflects only the perspective of the ruling class or the majority group, paying no attention to the viewpoint of minority groups, especially the foreigners. As in most countries of the world, the powerless foreigners were also disregarded in the ancient traditional society of Asia. However, this kind of reading produces an unreasonable interpretation of the story, justifying the evil king’s improper demand and blaming the upright soldier’s faithfulness.

## 2. Parallel Stories in Asia

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<sup>11</sup> Kim and Nyengele, 101.

<sup>12</sup> Its similar view can be found in a Jewish legend. See Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 546.

<sup>13</sup> Concerning the misunderstanding of Uriah in North America, refer to Uriah (Yong-Hwan) Kim, “Uriah the Hittite: A (Con)Text of Struggle for Identity,” in *The Bible in Asian America* (Semeia 90-91; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 69-85. According to Kim, “Although Uriah is not depicted in the Bible as an evil person (in fact, he was a good man), in order to save David’s face and to ameliorate his crime, some readers tend to give Uriah bad press...the rabbis branded Uriah as a rebel” (81).

Asian parallel or similar narratives with the story of Bathsheba and Uriah include the folktale of Domi and the story of Hanbing, which are considered as a story type of an authority figures taking a woman away from a powerless man. Their typical outline is that, lusting after a beautiful married woman, an authority figure tries to take her by force from a powerless man, but he fails to do so because of her resistance.

For example, *History of the Three Countries* (*Sam-guk-sa-ki*, in Korean), which was written by an ancient Korean historian in 1145, presents the folktale of Domi. According to this narrative, almost 2000 years ago, Domi belonged to the lower class, but he was righteous and trustworthy. His wife was very beautiful and chaste. Hearing about this man and his wife, the king wanted to test whether she was really chaste. He called Domi and said to him that, though the wife's virtue was chaste, she would not keep it, if she was persuaded with good sayings in a dark and quite place. But Domi answered to the king, "People's love is uncountable. My wife will keep her virtue of chastity to the last time of her life." When Domi was in the palace, the king sent to Domi's house his retainer who disguised himself like the king. The disguised king said to her, "I won your husband in the chess game to take you and now you belong to me. Tomorrow I will take you into my palace and you will be a court lady." With these words, he tried to rape her, but she said to him, "...Please enter into the room, first. I will follow you after changing my dress." When he was waiting for her, however, she made a female slave disguise like her, and the slave served him instead of her.

When the king heard of her playing this trick, he was very angry and made Domi a blind man. And the king put him in a small boat and let it go in a river. In addition, forcefully he brought Domi's wife into his palace and tried to rape her. However, she said to him, "I know I cannot live alone after losing my husband...Now, how can I disobey the king's command? Yet I am dirty because I am in menstruation. Waiting for a while and bathing clearly, I will return to you." When the king permitted her to do so, Domi's wife immediately escaped into a bank of the river. However, looking up at the heavens, she cried out herself, because she could not cross the river without a boat. At that time, suddenly a small boat came to her and she took it and arrived at an island, where she met Domi...They went to another country by a boat and lived together there.

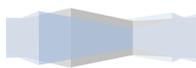
This happy ending of the story reflects the immorality which prevailed in the ruling class and the social conflict between the ruler and the ruled. It also reflects the Confucian thought that requires the woman's chastity and faithfulness to her husband.<sup>14</sup> It gives the audience instructions concerning the woman's virtue of chastity, the love of a married couple, the wisdom and courage of the lower class against the oppression of the ruling class. Especially it indicates that the married woman's chastity is more important and valuable than the loyalty to the king. Its similar versions are found in ancient documents and oral traditions in the Korean Peninsula.

Its parallel story in China is the narrative of Hanbing in the book of *Susinki*. According to the narrative, almost 2500 years ago, Hanbing, a minor official, took a beautiful woman as his wife, whose beauty was very famous in the capital of China. However, the king forcefully took her and sent her innocent husband to a borderline for a punishment, where he was imposed forced labor. Missing his wife and suffering for the hard work, unfortunately Hanbing killed himself. Hearing of her husband's death, his wife also killed herself, jumping down from a tower. Hanbing's wife left a testament, according to which she wished to be buried with her husband. Yet, being angry, the king allowed her body to be buried near her husband's tomb. However, a tree was produced from each of two tombs of Hanging and his wife. When the two trees soon became big, their branches and roots were entangled, and a couple of mandarin ducks were sadly crying out on the tree.

This story was produced in the context of the social unrest such as a continued war, in which the ordinary people lived with their family in a very difficult political and economic situation. Like the folktale of Domi, it does not only reflect the king's immorality and the conflict between the ruler and the ruled, but also it gives the audience some instructions, including the woman's chastity and the love of the couple. But the immorality of the king in this story is more serious than in the folktale of Domi, because Hanbing belongs to the class of officials, unlike Domi in the lower class. That is, the king's tyranny can be evaluated crueler in the story of Hanbing than in Domi's, because it influenced even a member of the ruling class. Nevertheless, among Asians, each king in

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<sup>14</sup> Ku-bok Chung, *New Interpretation on Samguksagi* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2004), 146 (in Korean).



these stories has been considered as one of the most notorious kings, but each victim as one of the righteous. On the other hand, countries ruled by such kings have been regarded as societies that had no justice and peace.

Whatever the backgrounds and purposes of these stories, they have common motifs with the story of Bathsheba as follows: (1) Each story introduces a beautiful married woman; (2) It presents a king who strongly lusted for her; (3) It shows that each of their husbands was good and sincere; (4) It implies that the king's lust should be blamed; (5) It considers the married woman's chastity as a very important virtue in the society; (6) It describes how the king tried to kill the innocent husband; and (7) It says that the king unfortunately destroyed the family. In spite of these similarities, one of the big differences is that, though the Asian stories present the woman's resistance against the king's lust, the biblical narrative does not show overtly such an idea.

### **3. Understanding of the Story in Asia**

#### **a. The Narrative Type**

In the perspective of the comparative study with its similar Asian narratives, the story of Bathsheba by itself belongs to the narrative type of an authority figure's taking a woman away from a powerless man. Though the story consists of a part of the Davidic court narrative, it is basically fit into such a narrative type. Considering the Asian context, such a story or event related to this narrative type was usually produced in the ruling period of a wicked king, whose country has seriously declined or even collapsed. For example, Kang, the king presented in the story of Hanbing, was a tyrant and his country was destroyed during his ruling period. If we regard the king as the representative of his country, it can be supposed that the immorality would prevail in the society he ruled.

David's forcible taking Bathsheba should be also considered in this view. Its following stories, including rape, revenge, killing, rebellion, power struggle, disaster, and national division, do not only show the social injustice and immorality in his kingdom, but also its decline and unrest. In spite of the narrator's mention of David's repentance in 2 Samuel 12, this story was used to present the crucial reason for his kingdom's unrest, embossing David's misbehavior, by which he was not able to maintain the dignity as the father and the leadership as the king.

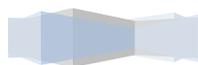
The stories related to such narrative type reflect the suffering of the powerless people. Therefore they were mainly circulated among the socially weak people, who tried to keep the virtues of chastity and conjugal affection within their families against the violence of the ruling class. Telling such stories, those people expressed their resistance and protest against the immoral authority. Though the ruling class attempted to hide such stories and to prohibit their circulation, the powerless rather tried to deliver them into the wider world in order to openly demonstrate against the wickedness of the king and in his kingdom. Considering from this perspective, it is certain that the story of Bathsheba would be also circulated among the powerless people of Israel in order to protest against the evil of King David and his party.<sup>15</sup> Telling this story, the powerless in Israel overtly would protest and prosecute against the evils of the ruling class, including the king. The storyteller, who was the collector of such circulated stories, delivers us the voice of the powerless: “But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of Yahweh” (2 Sam 11:27). As the prophets spoke for the powerless, the narrator judged David’s behavior as evil, reflecting the thinking of the weak.

**b. The Voiceless Woman**

Bathsheba in the story was voiceless until she was pregnant. As she was described as the object of David’s lust in verses 2-4, she is presented as a passive woman with a series of verbs that were used for David’s initiative: “and he saw... sent... inquired... sent... took her... lay with her...” Here the narrator does not introduce any voice and emotion from her. The following biblical stories related to her do not even imply any hint about her feelings and perspective for this event. Considering from the context of Asian culture, this voiceless Bathsheba in verses 2-4 should be regarded as a victim of David’s evil behavior rather than a co-conspirator of the adultery, because it was natural for a married woman to keep her chastity in any situation, which was also respected in ancient Israel according to Deuteronomy 22:22. That is, the voiceless position of Bathsheba that the narrator describes should be interpreted that she was not only very weak and forcibly victimized, but also her reaction was completely disregarded. On the contrary, David’s

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<sup>15</sup> According to McCarter, “The circumstances must have stirred public suspicion at the time, so that the interpretation of the events that our prophetic narrator received from his tradition may ultimately derive from circles contemporary with and hostile to David.” P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 291.



action which the narrator describes should be understood that he was very strong and dominant in this event, having taken the initiative.

Bathsheba briefly mentioned in the story, “I am pregnant!” She did not hide the pregnancy, but revealed such a perplexed situation. Yet she did not publicly spread such a thing, but secretly report to the king through a person. It seems to me that, within its literary context, this brief message, which is a turning point of the story, means her prosecuting the king for the misbehavior of the ruler himself, rather than her pleasure for being pregnant with the king’s child. She did not need a lengthy explanation for this prosecution because the king as its judge already knew the reason of her pregnancy. David’s attempt to hide his misconduct in the following content shows that her brief report is the exposure of the king’s immorality. On the other hand, considering the perspective of Asian culture, Bathsheba’s secret reporting to the king could be thought of as an expression of a social virtue, according to which a person, especially a woman, should not produce hearsay for the other’s misfortune. It implies that the narrator would have no intention for censuring Bathsheba in his storytelling.

According to the story, Bathsheba became David’s wife after Uriah’s death. Yet actually the king one-sidedly took her as one of his wives. Is it possible for Bathsheba as a widow to become the king’s wife in the traditional perspective of Asia? It is not impossible. In the strict Confucian society of Asia, especially in Chosun Dynasty of Korea, a widow in the upper class was not permitted to marry. They had to live alone until their death for the dead husband and his noble family. Moreover, as such ideology was strictly applied, a widow was even required to kill herself, following her husband’s death. However, when such Confucian thought was not dominant in the society of Korea, a widow was allowed to marry after a period. The idea of the widow’s marriage depended on the social ideology which prevailed in the country. If we consider that the ancient Israelite culture also permitted the widow’s marriage, Bathsheba’s marriage with David after Uriah’s death cannot be considered as an improper one.

Though David married to Bathsheba by his intention, unfortunately this marriage brought about the exposure of the event that he wanted to hide. Further, his permission of Solomon’s throne caused the continuous circulation of the story among the people, especially the powerless, who remembered him and his successor. Retelling the narrative

concerning the king and his successor, they continued to remember the tragic family of Bathsheba and Uriah, and its destruction. Consequently, Bathsheba's marriage with David made the people remember her first husband's tragic death and her second husband's wicked behavior.

**c. The Innocent Man**

Uriah was one of the warriors in David's elite force that was named as the "Thirty" (2 Sam 23:39; 1 Chr 11:41). His virtues are contrasted with David's vices. As Asian stories of the king's taking a married woman from the powerless man show, the immorality of the wicked king is contrasted with the virtue of the victimized people. Rhetorically this description does not only enhance the vice of the king, but also the virtue of the victim.

First, Uriah had a virtue of bravery. He belonged to the elite force, and he was placed at the front line of the war against the Ammonite, where he bravely fought without any suspicion. Finally he died in the battlefield. However, David cowardly and unmanly tried to hide his sin, and cunningly abetted Joab in crime to kill his innocent soldier. Second, Uriah had a virtue of faithfulness. He obeyed to the right order of the king, but rejected to his master's improper command. According to the Asian context, this action of Uriah can be considered as his faithfulness to the king, because a faithful retainer should not obey the king's improper order, even though he would be killed. On the contrary, David's command and adultery show that he was unfaithful to his soldiers, because he commanded them to participate in the unjust conspiracy. Third, Uriah had a virtue of continence. Even though the king asked him to stay with his wife in his house, he refused to violate the traditional custom (1 Sam 21:4-5). His continence is contrasted with David's adultery during the war.

Considering the Asian context, Uriah is completely innocent. He was victimized without any sin, though he wanted to keep the social virtues and morality. He was killed like Abel in Gen 4:1-16 and Naboth in 2 Kings 21. Uriah's innocent death raises a question of theodicy. Though the following stories of 2 Samuel 11 show God's punishment of David and his house for his immorality, they are never concerned about the Lord's compensation of Uriah's innocent death. Though the killer's kingdom was continued, the victim's family was never recovered.



In this unjust social situation of Israel, Uriah was remembered among the powerless in the stories of such victimized people which have been continuously retold in Asia. Through retelling his story, they remembered his virtues, innocent death, the loss of his wife, and their destroyed family. Through it, they also remembered the suffering of the people victimized by the king and his party. In addition, they protested against such violating power and authority against an innocent man. This would be the way of life and survival that the powerless developed in the social context of the king's victimizing tyranny over them. In this respect, the innocent man is still waiting for God's compensation, staying in the memory of the powerless.

### **Conclusion**

The comparative study between the story of Bathsheba and Uriah in 2 Samuel 11 and its similar folktales in Asia provides fruitful insights for understanding the biblical text and correcting its misunderstanding. It leads us to read the biblical story from the perspective of the powerless that made and retold such folktales in the situation in which social injustice prevailed for the rulers' misusing their power. According to this comparative study, the biblical story belongs to the narrative type of the king's taking a married woman from the powerless, in which the king is considered as the wicked, whereas the victim are among the just. That is, Bathsheba and her husband Uriah should be regarded as the victimized. Further, as such folktale in Asia is considered as a reflection of the immorality in the kingdom as well as of the king himself, the biblical story should be understood from this perspective. That is, it reflects the injustice and immorality of David and his kingdom, as its following stories show. It means that it should be regarded as a pivotal story within the "Court Narrative" rather than a form of gossip, which simply deals with his private adultery.