On Virtue: What Bathsheba Taught Me about My Maligned Sisters

Mel Henderson

Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.
—*Proverbs 31:10*

It is early evening in ancient Jerusalem, and a beautiful young Jewish woman, recently wed, carries a small bundle of clean clothing and a linen towel. Her sandals pad against the limestone pathway that borders the synagogue. She is on her way to the community *mikvah*, a font-like, open-air, recessed pool designed for ritual bathing, where a few other women may or may not already be waiting their turn. This is a devotion the women of her faith observe once a month, seven days after their menstrual cycle ends, in order to be "purified from [their] uncleanness," to use the words from 2 Samuel, chapter 11. While the *mikvah* is enclosed for the privacy and protection of the women, it's still possible for someone with a particular vantage point—say, someone on the roof of the king's palace, perhaps—to illicitly watch a woman complete her ritual, to watch her disrobe and completely immerse herself in the sanctified waters of the *mikvah* before she emerges to dress herself in fresh clothing. Thus, according to her obedience to the law, the young wife Bathsheba is restored to purity.

Of all the fascinating things I learned when I undertook a study of Bathsheba, this came as a true surprise: When David saw Bathsheba, she was not bathing on the roof. He saw her bathing *from* the roof—his roof. How could this be? Is it possible

that we've told and retold this story so incorrectly for so long? I checked and re-checked, and the scriptural account in 2 Samuel, chapter 11 never places Bathsheba on the roof—even though almost all artists and storytellers put her there. But the scriptural account does indicate that her bath was the *mikvah* ritual—and a *mikvah* was always built into the ground, or on the ground, to very particular specifications. Such a structure would never be found on any roof. It seems when David was watching Bathsheba, she was where she was supposed to be and doing what she was supposed to be doing.

This is a detail that matters because Bathsheba's story still informs the ways that we talk about sex, sexual intent, and feminine virtue today. For generations, her story has been retold in the most basic reduction: Bathsheba was either a calculating seductress, or, a little less harshly, she was indiscreet and immodest about where she chose to take her bath. And thus, she caused David—the good shepherd boy, the loving son, the poet, the musician, the slayer of giants, and our good king—to lust first in heart, then in body: "and the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child" (2 Samuel 11:5).

Even some respected sources claim that it was all calculated, that it was always Bathsheba's intent to find a way into the palace to generate an heir, no matter the cost—though even the most sinister and illicit plan couldn't have worked without David's willingness to be seduced. The website WomenInTheBible.org confidently declares that Bathsheba was a "clever and unscrupulous woman." By my own reading, this statement can only stand on inventive extrapolation, but it's not an uncommon stance. People are easiest to deal with when we can simplify or dismiss them as one-beat caricatures—in this case, "the dangerous woman." There is no shortage of visual art, music, mythology, fiction, or tales out of Hollywood that depict the femme fatale: Delilah, Cleopatra, Jezebel, the Sirens, most of the "Bond girls" in 007 movies, and even Jessica Rabbit—women who are seductively one-beat, one-dimensional, cautionary tales for the potentially tempted. Faced with the complicated things that

make us human, things like respect for unsolved questions, we prefer to cosset ourselves with simplifications—even if we must trade the truth for it.

Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie once spoke about the danger of a single story. The problem with stereotypes, with these one-beat reductions, she said, "is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story the only story."[1] A woman who has a morally troubling episode in her life is most easily handled by dismissing the woman herself as morally compromised.

David and Bathsheba are one chapter in a relatively concise chronicle of a large kingdom; the record couldn't have accommodated a detailed biography of all the secondary historical figures, or even all the primary male ones. But some of the most fascinating and important information we have is buried or hidden in the wallpaper behind the main players—in the stories of the women.

Discovering that Bathsheba was never on the roof was a big surprise. But discovering that she likely authored a chapter in the book of Proverbs: *that's* the detail that blew the top right off my head. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

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The first time I heard the David and Bathsheba story, I was in Sunday school, seven or eight years old. The soft-spoken, elderly woman who taught my class held up an art print of Bathsheba, beautifully adorned in flowing red cloth. She was barefoot, she wore lots of gold jewelry, and she gazed directly back at her observer. David was nowhere in sight.

"This is Bathsheba," the teacher announced. I said I loved her flowy red dress, but the teacher declared the dress inappropriate, and I decided to be quiet until I knew what she wanted to say about the lady in the flowy red dress. She continued, "Bathsheba was a beautiful and selfish woman. It was very wrong of her to tempt King David." Then she added an odd additional detail: "She kept her selfishness a secret."

Being seven or eight, I had no idea what she meant or what Bathsheba did wrong, but I did begin to wonder if this meant that being beautiful and being selfish went hand in hand, as if selfishness were somehow intrinsic to beauty. I remember scanning my church congregation for beautiful women—or probably just beautiful dresses, since at seven or eight years old, my aesthetic was more about adornment than essence—and I wondered if the beautiful ladies—the ones in pretty dresses—were really secretly selfish. Should I be afraid of them? When I grew up, would I be beautiful and selfish, too? How many things can a woman secretly be?

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Bathsheba, for me, has become a symbol of maligned women everywhere—or rather, she is an image of a healed woman after being a broken and shamed one. And I mean "maligned women" in whatever forms that takes: women who made a mistake, were raped, or were subject to some other moral or social or cultural code that declared judgment and somehow made them matter less than other people, or made them matter less than even other women. Shame as a way to control and teach features prominently in the history of the feminine.

Last year, I had lunch with a high school friend whom I hadn't seen in years. Over avocado salad and raspberry lemonade, she told me a story she'd never told before: She had an uncle who had molested her until she was fourteen, when she finally found the courage to tell her mother about it. Luckily, her mother believed her. It helped that she was aware of another niece who had quietly made the same claim. My friend's mother took pains to protect her from future abuse—letting her stay at a friend's for the weekend whenever the uncle visited, for example—but she was so fearful of the potential disruption to the family that she never pursued the matter. She never told her husband about it. The uncle was never told he was unwelcome in her home. He was never reported or even confronted. Mother and daughter

quietly kept the uncle's secret for him. The uncle grew old and died, never having answered for his actions.

My friend's story was hard for me to hear. I thought of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel and what he said about our responsibility to victims: "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."[2] Because a mother protected the oppressor, the burden of shame fell to the child.

My friend was sure she was ruined. Her virtue, she believed, had been taken. No one would ever want to be with her. But before she graduated high school, she struck on a half-solution: She would sleep with a boy, on purpose, and this would "overwrite" her damaged sexual history. She was sure no one would want to marry the cast-off of a pedophile, but if she could honestly say that she'd only had one boyfriend with whom she "did stuff," and she'd confessed and repented of it, then maybe someone would find her acceptable.

She was deeply (but needlessly) embarrassed to tell me that this is what she did, twenty-five years after she did it. Both of her parents and the uncle have since passed away. I asked if she believes that her mother should have handled the situation differently. She didn't think so. Her dad would have handled it differently, she's sure, and she could have told him herself, but she didn't, so she can't blame her mom. Besides, she said, it was probably good that her mother didn't turn it into a "whole big thing," because, as she said, "I'm managing just fine." Then she joked that her decision to start smoking and drinking in the ninth grade had turned out to be a lifesaver.

I wished there were more to the story. I told her I wanted to invent a fat slice of essential, unfathomable missing information here—anything that might somehow redeem her mother's inaction. But that's it, she said. Her mother was embarrassed, scrambling to stay calm and figure out the right thing to do. She felt almost as powerless as the girl herself. She was most afraid of making a bad situation worse—and like a Greek tragedy, her choices brought about the very end she feared the most.

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Bathsheba must have been very afraid, at some point, that she would be stoned—or maybe she was most afraid that she would never have God's forgiveness. She was a very young, newly married, observant Jewish woman carrying another man's child.

When David first summoned her to the palace, Bathsheba's husband, Uriah (a military commander and one of David's good friends), had been away at war for months. Everyone she regularly associated with knew that she'd bathed at the *mikvah* each month, so they knew she was not pregnant when Uriah left. There were only two ways to explain a pregnancy now: adultery or rape.

According to the law, both parties to adultery must be put to death. The king, however, could excuse himself from the law, so if David chose not to protect Bathsheba, she would be on her own to deal with the consequences. If she claimed she was raped, the law required that she name her attacker, and if the law were upheld, her attacker would be put to death. The kingdom would lose its king. But this was never a likely outcome. Even if she had named David, and even if they had believed her, once again, the king would be exempt.

I don't believe Bathsheba sought David's attentions. We hear it explained with phrasing such as "the adultery may have been involuntary"—which is really just a sanitized way of saying she may have been, by definition, raped. This doesn't mean David held a knife to her throat and assaulted her in a violent Hollywood-style struggle. The king would need no such theatrics to accomplish his will. This was not the first time a mature or intimidating man would insist that a young, frightened woman do something she did not want to do. *That* sort of thing happens every day.

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The weight of needless shame, like the shame suffered by my high school friend, can wear a person down to a nub, and entire families can be changed for generations. One of my favorite

stories belongs to someone I don't even remember—but I'll thank her here, in the unlikely event she ever reads these lines, for sharing this story in a car stuffed with women en route to some event that I no longer recall. I'll call her Jennifer.

Jennifer's family had always been embarrassed about one great-grandmother in their family tree who had done jail time for pretending to be a man. No other information was ever offered. All Jennifer knew was that her great-grandmother was crazy, though not in a dangerous way, that she'd pretended to be a man, and that she was punished for it. Almost 150 years later, her posterity still dismissed her with an eye roll and quickly changed the subject.

When Jennifer undertook a study of family history, she indulged her curiosity about this mysterious relative. Diligent searching turned up court records, journal pages, correspondence between a judge and a doctor, and a letter from the head master of a prestigious medical school in her country, which appeared, at first, to be addressed to her father. Strangely, this letter praised Mr. So-and-So's academic achievement, though the man had never attended a day of medical school.

Only by patiently assembling all the pieces of the puzzle was Jennifer able to discover the truth: Her great-grandmother was an exceptionally bright girl in a time and place when educational opportunities for girls were severely limited. This girl wanted nothing more than to go to medical school and become a doctor, but this was not an available option. When she was old enough and tall enough, she boldly fabricated a male identity after her father's name, disguised herself as a man, and enrolled herself in medical school.

When she was found out, she was arrested and jailed. The doctor who examined her declared her insane and recommended to the judge that she be moved to a sanitarium. At her parents' pleading, the judge agreed to entrust her to the care of her father if he gave his word to keep her safely contained at home and take responsibility for all her future behavior. She went on to live a normal life. She married and had several children. She never exhibited any signs of insanity.

For Jennifer, all at once, the woman who had been a family's shame became a family hero. Jennifer was distraught that there was no further evidence that her great-grandmother was able to add to her education after that. She fears her grandmother was shamed into submission. But for that moment—for that window on that part of her life—she became a burning beacon. Sometimes, an entire landscape is changed by just a little new light.

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When Bathsheba told David that she was with child, he scrambled to cover his sins. He summoned Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, back from battle. By all reports, Uriah was an honorable man who cherished his wife. David hosted Uriah at supper and flattered him by asking his opinion of the commanding officer's military skill. To thank him for his service and as a token of friendship, David told Uriah he deserved to go home and spend a night with his wife. Of course this was calculated. If Uriah slept with his wife, her pregnancy could pass as legitimate.

But in the morning, David's servants reported that Uriah had not gone home at all; he had slept outside the palace walls with his men, according to his personal code of honor. If his men could not go home to their wives, then neither would he.

So David tried again. The next night he hosted Uriah at supper, but this time he made sure to get him drunk before sending him home. But even drunk, Uriah did not go home. He would not leave his men. And now Uriah and his men were due back at the front. Desperate, David wrote a letter to his nephew Joab, Uriah's commanding officer, instructing him to put Uriah in a dangerous battle position and then order the rest of the men to withdraw. Uriah was left vulnerable. He was easily killed, not directly by David's hand but indirectly so—and as the prophet Nathan reported, "The thing that David had done displeased the Lord."

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2 Samuel, chapter 11, verse 26: "And when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband."

Bathsheba's mourning period could have been as short as one week or much longer. We don't know. What we do know is that it was highly ritualized and involved many family members, but I imagine she must have still felt profoundly alone. Could she have dared to tell anyone about the double tragedy that was breaking her heart? We don't know what she knew about David's intentions at this point, or if she had disclosed her pregnancy to anyone else. The law said that a widowed woman with no children could not remarry except to her deceased husband's brother or, in very rare cases, to someone else with the brother's consent. David's choice to bring her into the palace and make her one of his wives was ultimately a blessing to Bathsheba, but it was likely another violation of the law.

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The intrigues of David's court occurred 3,000 years ago, but the way he responded to a crisis feels as fresh as today's news: people have always tried to create a new narrative when we feel the original one is unacceptable. I know a family of avid lay-genealogists where one family member keeps changing a certain grandfather's birth date to match a birth certificate that was proven to be false. The false certificate places the child's birth within the bonds of wedlock, and this family historian doesn't want to ruin what he believes is his family's perfect record of chaste and covenant births. Each time he changes the birth date, another relative goes online to change it back to the truth. It seems that fear, shame, and pride are all just varied flavors of the same bitter ash. They can give us a very low tolerance for truth-telling.

While my father was serving in Vietnam, my mother and older brother, who was just a toddler at the time, went to live with my paternal grandparents in their rural, religiously conservative community. One day, in the spirit of trust created when two women share a small living space and work with their hands, my grandmother told my mother that she wanted to set the record straight about something. She confided in my mother that she and Grandpa were already expecting their firstborn when they

got married. Then she shared one of her dearest sorrows: When her own teenage daughters discovered the disparity between their parents' wedding date and the baby's birth date, they accused their mother of being promiscuous. For reasons I don't understand, the interpretation they landed on was that their good father nobly married a cheap girl who was carrying another man's child, and then he nobly raised the child as his own.

Grandma said this was simply not true. She and Grandpa had slept together before they married, the baby was his, and she had never been with any other man. But her daughters were unconvinced. They wanted a narrative that said their father was superhuman, instead of one that acknowledged that both their mother and their father are human.

There's no way to prove it anymore, but I believe my grandmother, not just because she was an honest and hardworking woman, but because it's easily the most likely explanation. Somehow, even 3,000 years after Bathsheba, we struggle to connect our ideas of virtue with anything but very uncomplicated femininity. And we pass that struggle on to our posterity. Less than a decade ago at a family reunion, a cousin who thought he was enlightening me very discreetly opened a binder to show me this discrepancy in my grandparents' wedding date and my oldest uncle's birthday. I told him I knew, and I love Grandma and Grandpa anyway. He closed the book with a benevolent smile and said, "Me too. Grandpa did a noble thing."

I wanted to punch him, but instead I told him what I've just told you. It's experiences like this that make me believe that there's an immutable correlation between a person's tolerance for the truth and their capacity for compassion.

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The son that Bathsheba carried was born right on schedule, but he did not survive. For seven days after he was born, this young mother held, rocked, and tried to feed her infant son while he withered in her arms. There was nothing she could do to save him.

David had been told that his son would die. After he married Bathsheba and took her into the palace, but before the baby came, the prophet Nathan came to tell David a short story:

> There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and [the rich man] spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but [the rich man] took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him. (2 Samuel 12:1–4)

David was filled with righteous indignation. He so disapproved of this man's behavior that he declared that the offender should be punished by death for his lack of compassion—but first, he must give the poor man at least four ewes to compensate him for his loss.

Then Nathan made the parable clear: Bathsheba was the poor man's beloved ewe that the rich man stole from him, and "Thou art the man." David was sobered and humbled. He feared for his life. He said unto Nathan, *I have sinned against the Lord.* Nathan assured David that God would preserve him despite his sins but that the child Bathsheba carried would die.

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Proverbs, chapter 31, is recognized as the seminal Judeo-Christian treatise on feminine virtue—the measure and standard of a godly woman. But this passage never interested me until it was brought to my attention by a speaker at a women's conference. It begins, "The words of King Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him," and every verse after that is counsel from a mother to her son, as if spoken in her own voice. But I'd never heard of King Lemuel.

Lemuel, scholars say, is a poetic name for *Solomon*, a term of endearment that a mother might use, or a pseudonym Solomon might use to refer to himself. So Proverbs 31 is, in all likelihood, King Solomon's mother's advice—a queen counseling her son before he becomes the king. And who was King Solomon's mother? Bathsheba. She addresses him, "What, my son? . . . the son of my womb . . . the son of my vows." She uses this form address because Solomon was Bathsheba's first child born within the covenant of marriage. Some scholars also say that one of the proofs that the counsel for choosing a wife found in chapter 31 is authored by an intelligent woman is its emphasis on a woman's character. It contains no mention whatsoever of choosing a wife by her charm or by her pomegranate-like breasts—even though the beauty and grace of the king's wives were a reflection of his perceived power. Rather, Bathsheba counseled Solomon to consider the sort of woman a woman chooses to be. This is wealth: a woman who knows who she is in the eyes of God and knows that she matters to him. This is the price that is far above rubies.

If it's true that we reveal much about our own lives by the counsel we give our children, then Proverbs 31 is record of not just emotional survival but emotional beauty, faith, individual power, self-awareness, hope, and wisdom. In the Old Testament, wisdom is often compared to the preciousness of rubies and is even characterized as female. King Solomon himself counsels, "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom . . . She is more precious than rubies, and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her" (Proverbs 3:13, 15). Bathsheba was a vessel of feminine wisdom.

The words of Bathsheba in verse 20 describe the sort of queen Solomon should choose: "She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy." This is a strange standard for a queen in a palace, who has no responsibility to prepare food for the poor or to deliver it to them herself. If a queen concerns herself with the poor at all, she has people

to do these things for her. Bathsheba wanted her son to look for a woman who chooses to be kind and compassionate.

Look for a woman who chooses to be a fair judge of herself and her own work, who won't indulge in false modesty. Look for a woman who chooses to work with her hands so that she may contribute as well as consume. Look for a woman who is not afraid to conduct a business transaction or learn new skills, a woman who speaks well of others, opening her mouth with both wisdom and kindness. Look for a woman who can be trusted because she is truthful. And most of all, remember that virtue is a power of truth and wisdom. Virtue is not a component of flesh.

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Bathsheba's story particularly speaks to the troubled and broken hearts of women who want to know God but are afraid that, for one reason or another, God is not particularly interested in them. She taught her son that a woman can judge herself fairly even if no one else is doing so. She taught him that a woman's heart matters to God, and her heart matters to herself, so her heart should matter to him. I wonder if she knew that her counsel to her son would also inform women thousands of years after she passed out of this life. At the end of the day, Bathsheba's story shows me that a woman can limit the amount of damage another person can do in her life. No one can make her less than she is. She gets to keep who she is no matter what.

Solomon's respect for his mother's wisdom was so great that he had another throne installed for her in his counsel room, and Bathsheba became the wisest king's most trusted advisor. Three thousand years later, I hope we may be starting to understand what is meant by feminine virtue, feminine wisdom, and a price far greater than rubies.

> *Her children arise up, and call her blessed . . . Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.*
>
> —Proverbs 31:28, 31

Notes

1. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED Talks, Ted Global, July 2009.

2. Wiesel, Elie. Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. Oslo, Norway, Dec. 10, 1986.