

The Battle Over the Bible

A Sermon on David and Bathsheba

by

Grayson Stewart Gilbert

1. Introduction

2. The Problem

a. David's Abuse of Institutional Power Dynamics

- i. The first argument that has been used to support the idea that David raped Bathsheba is that power dynamics were at play.
 1. If you're unfamiliar with the term "power dynamics," what it refers to is the influence or control that a person, or group of people, can use to produce a desired change—and this change can be seen on an individual level or an institutional level.
 2. In recent years, the idea of power dynamics has taken on a deeper focus because certain imbalances of power and authority are at play.
- ii. It's important to know that this idea of power dynamics is a psychological and sociological category—meaning that it relies on the current understanding of these so-called abuses of power.
 1. Key factors are used to support this idea, and in our cultural climate, those are things such as money, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and more.
 - a. The problem is that this is the framework that many influential Christians are approaching the biblical text with.
 - b. In our example today with David and Bathsheba, the bible, ultimately, is not the final authority on how they view the text, but rather, this idea of power dynamics.
 2. To put it quite simply, the argument is that David was in an exceedingly powerful position as king and abused his power to rape Bathsheba.
 - a. An example: "Just as intercourse between an adult and a minor, even a "consenting" minor, is today termed "statutory rape," so the intercourse between David and his subject Bathsheba (even if Bathsheba, under the psychological pressure of one in power over her, acquiesced to the

intercourse) is understood in biblical law, and so presented in this narrative, to be a case of rape—what today we call “power rape,” and the victimizer, not the victim, is held accountable.” (Richard Davidson)

- b. Notice, there are several key assumptions that are being made about the story of David and Bathsheba.
 - i. For one, he begins by defining the idea of rape in light of how we understand statutory rape today.
 - ii. Secondly, he makes the claim that biblical Law also defines things this way.
 - iii. Third, he says that Bathsheba didn’t sin, even if she agreed to enter into adultery with David, because the power differential between the two of them.

b. David’s Forcible Seizure and Rape of Bathsheba

- i. The next argument comes from the narrative of 2 Samuel 11:2-5 and the parable that the prophet Nathan gives to David in 2 Samuel 12:1-4.

1. Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king’s house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, “I am pregnant.” (2 Samuel 11:2-5).

- a. John Piper makes the point here is that David didn’t invite her, he didn’t lure her, he didn’t even woo her—but that that he took her.
 - b. More than this, Piper makes the claim that David sent an armed garrison of men to take her by force and bring her back to his chambers so he could have his way with her.
2. Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, “There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb

which he bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." (2 Samuel 12:1-4).

- a. Piper says, "[Nathan] really re-created the adultery in the categories of theft and killing. Not Uriah's killing—that's an added evil—but as it were, Bathsheba's killing represented by the little, little, helpless pet lamb being killed and served up as a meal. So, I would say, for these two reasons, we are not exaggerating to use the word rape for David's abuse of his power in the indulgence of his sinful lust in the way he took Bathsheba."
- b. Notice the flow of his argument here from these two evidences in the text.
 - i. First, Piper makes the claim that the word "took" in 2 Samuel 11 implies that David forced Bathsheba to come to his home.
 - ii. Second, Piper implies that when David lay with Bathsheba, it implies rape.
 - iii. Third, Piper says that the parable from Nathan expressly teaches that Bathsheba is seen as a victim of David's abuse of power.
- c. Rachel Denhollander makes a similar claim but then shifts the argument further: if you disagree with her in how you understand the text, you are complicit.

ii. *The Result: The Church Harms Victims of Sexual Abuse*

1. "...More often than not, pastors take passages like that, and they minimize, downplay, or completely twist what happened. And they apply it even to survivors... And they twist what happened with that abuse, and it is devastating. That is one of the reasons that survivors feel so much betrayal from the church, because so many passages of scripture like this: the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, the Levitical command that you must cry out if you're abused, the

commands related to evidence. We handle them so sloppily. We do not treat them with exegetical care, and we make heinous mistakes when we do that are crushing to survivors. And when survivors look at that and say, "You didn't even handle scripture properly," the sense of betrayal is deep and founded. So the very first thing we need to do is handle our scripture properly. Handle our doctrine properly." (Rachel Denhollander)

2. The argument in full is that based on a proper understanding of the text—it is abundantly clear that David raped Bathsheba, and if you don't see it that way, you downplay, minimize, or completely twist the Scriptures.
3. What we need to do is understand why this is actually an issue. The "why" is crucial because this same method has popped up time and again with various different movements within the church where the same question has been raised: did God say?

3. Conclusion: Why Does This Even Really Matter?

a. Scriptural Authority Means Something or It Doesn't

- i. If you recall, every one of the major players in this debate used a term called "power dynamics."
 1. The argument was that David abused his power as king to rape Bathsheba—and this is the lynchpin to the whole argument.
 - a. Before you get your hackles up, there is an element of truth to this. If you've heard my sermon on Esther, she was essentially forced to go into the brothel of the king.
 - b. This was not uncommon for kings to do. In fact, there's an ancient tradition called "Prima Nocta," which means "right of the first night," that allowed kings to fornicate with any woman, even a virgin bride on her wedding night.
 2. The reality is that David was in a very powerful position and he certainly abused his power to have his way with Bathsheba.
 - a. We see this in the record of 2 Samuel 11, where David sends people under his authority to go to Bathsheba, bring Uriah back home, and even send Uriah to his death.

- b. But none of that answers the question of whether or not the Bible would classify this as rape. And that's the crux of the issue; we have to be able to look at the Bible, and ask: what does God say?
- 3. "If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. But if in the field the man finds the girl who is engaged, and the man forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lies with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the girl; there is no sin in the girl worthy of death, for just as a man rises against his neighbor and murders him, so is this case. When he found her in the field, the engaged girl cried out, but there was no one to save her." (Deuteronomy 22:23-27)
 - a. First, if a man and woman are caught in the act of adultery, they are both to be stoned to death. The reason given in v. 24 is that the man violated his neighbor's wife, and the woman did not cry out.
 - b. Secondly, notice the word "but" in verse 25—because it shows a very important contrast here between what qualifies as adultery and rape.
- 4. Now compare that to the argument made by those who say Bathsheba was raped based on what they read into the text.
 - a. There is nothing in 2 Samuel 11 that suggests Bathsheba was forced into having sex with David.
 - b. The Scriptures also have no issue telling us about instances where rape is committed.
- ii. The point that I'm driving towards with all of this is that the narrative simply doesn't state that David raped Bathsheba—but rather than reading and accepting the text at face value, the concept of "power dynamics" informs how they understand the text.
 - 1. What qualifies as rape in their minds is that David abused his power as king even though the text never explicitly states that he forced Bathsheba.
 - a. In other words, you have to accept what Richard Davidson said, that even if Bathsheba, under the psychological pressure of one in power over her,

consented to intercourse—it is a case of “power rape,” and that David, not Bathsheba, is held accountable.

- b. To put that even more clearly, it is when you affirm the modern understanding of these differences in power between David and Bathsheba, that she was raped, and therefore innocent on all fronts.
2. The problem with that, is that this violates everything you just heard about what the Bible defines as rape in the Law of God.
3. In the end, the Bible speaks to these things quite clearly—and the Bible is either the authority we will go to first and foremost, or we will not. The authority of the Scriptures has to mean something.

b. Words and Hermeneutics Matter

- i. If you recall, the argument from John Piper is that in 2 Samuel 11, David seizes Bathsheba by force and rapes her.
 1. He claims that the word for “take” implies that David, in essence, kidnapped her, and that he sent men to do this, and that he then forced himself upon her.
 2. The problem is that none of these words mean these things.
 - a. The word for “take” means just that—to take something that doesn’t belong to you—and it is clear from the context in 2 Samuel 11 that over and over again, Bathsheba is described as the wife of Uriah.
 - b. Secondly, even the messengers that David sent were just that: messengers.
 - c. Thirdly, the word used to describe that David “lay with” Bathsheba is an incredibly benign term that is used all throughout the Old Testament to refer to intercourse—and not one of them refers to rape.
 3. What Piper fails to mention in his argument is that 2 Samuel 11:4, it tells us that Bathsheba also came to David, and that after they finished doing the deed, she cleansed herself of her impurity, and then she simply returned home.
 - a. In other words, Bathsheba did precisely what the Law would say was worthy of her own death, right alongside king David.

c. *The Reality of Sin is Undermined*

- i. Sin, as it is defined in Scripture, is always between God and man.
 1. David used three different terms in Psalm 51 to speak of this reality.
 - a. He was openly and flagrantly rebellious.
 - b. He was going his own way rather than God's way.
 - c. He was always guilty of missing the mark of God's perfect holiness.
 2. Genuine confession of sin requires that we be of the same mind with God.
 - a. The standard is not the prevailing cultural dogma of our day.
 - b. The standard is not analytical and psychological frameworks.
 - c. The standard is not if someone *feels* if we have sinned against them.
 - d. The standard is bound up in the authority of the Divinely inspired Scriptures, because this is what God has revealed to us.
- ii. The perversion of reading the Scriptures through the lens of power dynamics is that the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, and Bathsheba, are seen purely as victims who are not guilty of committing sin and in need of a Savior.
 1. This plays out in radical ways when we consider much of what is behind the "Me Too" movement, the "Believe All Women" movement, and various other things.
 - a. To be clear, there are genuine victims of sexual assault, and we must recognize this.
 - b. But when we redefine passages in light of power dynamics, what you inevitably will do is downplay, minimize, and outright twist what the Scriptures say with regard to sin.
 2. If you are buying into any of these systems of thought—you do not yet see sin as God sees sin.
 - a. The reason you don't see sin as God sees sin is because you have not yet placed yourself under the authority of the Word.
 - b. And if you do this, you don't just get sin wrong, you will ultimately get the gospel wrong.

d. *The Beauty of the Gospel is Distorted*

- i. If we fail to accurately understand our sin before God, we will never come to understand the fullness of grace freely given to us through Jesus Christ.

1. When David saw his sin for what it truly was: rebellion and even a hatred of God and His Law, and he confessed his sin, what happens next is amazing.
 - a. The prophet Nathan tells David, “The Lord has taken away your sin.”
 - b. There would still be consequences for David, but there would be no condemnation.
 2. Though the rest of David’s life was filled with much grief, he had joy. Why did he have joy?
 - a. To put it simply: he was free.
 - b. He was freed from the guilt of what he did, but ultimately, he was freed from the wrath of God.
- ii. When you hold to a “gospel” that sees everything through the lens of power dynamics, the thing that is conspicuously missing is grace.
1. This is what you have to understand: you’re the oppressor in their worldview. You will always have to work harder and harder to please them and to meet their criteria—but you will always be guilty.
 2. But the gospel promises us that no matter how ugly our sin is, it can be forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ—and that forgiveness will never be something dangled over your head.
 3. When we come to see the battle over words is ultimately a battle over sin and the gospel all of this becomes critical. We must, in other words, be mastered by the gospel itself—so what is meant by “gospel”?

Small Group Questions

1. Why is it important that Scripture is our ultimate and final authority, rather than the various other authorities offered to us to understand the Bible?
2. Explore ways this can lead to natural consequences in how we view God and doctrines like sin, salvation, etc. Answer how we can guard against these consequences.
3. In what ways do you see that Scripture may not be the ultimate authority in your life (e.g., finances, raising children, marriage, etc.)? Why does this matter?