



David's Abuse of Power

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DAVID'S INVOLVEMENT WITH BATHSHEBA IS A WELL-KNOWN STORY THAT RAISES several questions about the nature of leadership, power, and sex. Did David seduce Bathsheba, or did Bathsheba seduce David? Was their involvement one of mutual consent, or was Bathsheba raped by David? These are the sorts of questions that frequently emerge in adult education classes and in discussions with colleagues.

Given President Clinton's misconduct, of particular interest is the attempt to define what happened in the President's office as a "private" matter. Is this assertion a politic of self-interest, or a politic of the common good? Different politicians express different perspectives.

The account of David's misconduct is a timely and evocative story that provides the contemporary leader, political or religious, with insight into leadership and the moral application of power. Accordingly, in this article, I will use David's story in combination with current leadership literature to address leadership, eth-

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The anachronistic exercise of relating the story of David and Bathsheba to modern leadership literature provides a way to reflect on significant issues of leadership and power.

ics, and the dynamics of misconduct, including the issue of when sex is a public matter.

The assertion that “everyone has a price” insists that everyone is vulnerable to crossing the line of morality, especially in matters of sexuality. Many people who work in the area of sexual ethical violations believe that a person who normally would not cross an ethical line is most vulnerable when she or he thinks there is no price that will entice them to do so. This question of “price” lies at the heart of David’s story as he exerted his power to pursue Bathsheba and cover up the resulting pregnancy.

Up to this point in his life David has demonstrated remarkable constraint and self-control. He has been portrayed as a good leader with great integrity. The early hearers of his story could, and did, view David as *the* model of a religious and political leader. Yet, even David had a chink in his armor that led him to cross the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The listener to this story is drawn into a deeper understanding of the susceptibility of good leaders to the dynamics of immoral leadership.

I. 2 SAMUEL 11:1-4

The story apparently begins with David enjoying some afternoon sun on the roof of his palace. As he looks down from his rooftop, he is erotically stirred by the beauty of Bathsheba. She is bathing in his view. David wants her.

Some have pointed the finger at Bathsheba, suggesting that she seduced David by bathing where the king was sure to notice her. This makes Bathsheba, not David, responsible for the king’s inability to control his erotic urges. Such a suggestion is ludicrous. Even if Bathsheba behaved in a way to arouse the king’s passions, King David is fully responsible for what he does. Despite her beauty and allure, Bathsheba does not have the ability to cause the king to lose all sense of control and responsibility any more than Goliath had the ability to cause David to be afraid. Indeed, in the latter crisis David remained calm and in control (1 Sam 17: 36-37).

Stephen Covey’s “proactive model” of leadership is an excellent elaboration of this point. The model focuses on the leader’s responsibility in any given situation. Covey points out that ultimately the leader has “response-ability”—the ability to choose your response....We have, by conscious decision or by default, chosen to empower those things [like Bathsheba’s beauty] to control us.”¹ The point is clear. The leader must be in control.

Peter Rutter, in his landmark work entitled *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, is also adamant about this. The leader has total responsibility for actions taken toward another, particularly in matters of sexuality. Rutter writes:

any sexual behavior by a man in power within what I define as the forbidden zone is inherently exploitive of a woman’s trust. Because he is the keeper of that trust, it is

¹Stephen R. Covey, *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990) 70-71.

the man's responsibility, *no matter what level of provocation or apparent consent by the woman.*²

For Rutter, "The forbidden zone is a condition of relationship in which sexual behavior is prohibited because a man holds in trust the...woman."³ King David had a trust to care for and protect people like Bathsheba. To cross the line and act out his erotic desires with Bathsheba is to enter the forbidden zone, to exploit at another's expense the power the office of king imparts to him.

Lebacqz and Barton make a similar point in their research into the way some leaders, pastors in particular, set ethical limits on their behavior. They found that, in practice, the prime motivator in setting limits was not the role the leader occupied, but the personal integrity and personal ethical standards of the individual. Their book, however, makes a strong case for the *role* of the leader as fundamental in determining what is ethical behavior and what is not. Lebacqz and Barton state, "The role of pastor [leader] is morally relevant to determining appropriate sexual ethics."⁴

The authors go on to discuss the kind of power that is inherent in a particular role. While their emphasis is on pastors, the insights they offer are applicable to any leader. The following list provides a good idea of the variety of forms that power may take:

- the power of freedom—the opportunity to engage another without the continual supervision of others
- the power of access and accessibility—privileged access to others
- the power of knowledge—access to a great deal of personal information about another.

This variety and amount of power makes it clear that there is an inequality of power between leader and subordinate.

Some leaders do not feel powerful and thus may underestimate the power they do have. But the leader's perception of power or lack of power is ultimately irrelevant. The leader's role produces an implicit trust between the leader and those over whom the leader has power. The leader must not use this sacred trust for personal gratification. The power differential between King and subject, or leader and follower, makes the person with less power vulnerable to exploitation.

There are aspects of the story of David's seduction of Bathsheba that often go unnoticed. One has to do with the reason for Bathsheba's bathing. In ancient Israel, the law required a ritual cleansing bath at the conclusion of her menstrual flow. After such a bath, Bathsheba, according to religious law, would still be sexually taboo for several more days. When David took Bathsheba he would have known this law. Thus, even if we make the textual assumption that Bathsheba may

²Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Men in Power—Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers, and Others—Betray Women's Trust* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989) 21 (italics his).

³Ibid., 25.

⁴Karen Lebacqz and Richard G. Barton, *Sex in the Parish* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 93-99.

have been trying to seduce David, there was a strong cultural/religious reason why King David ought not to have sought her sexually.

Another frequently overlooked section of this story, Walter Brueggemann points out, is the time when this encounter happened: “[when] Kings went out to war” (v. 1).⁵ Instead of “going out” himself, David sent Joab to fight. Because David stayed home at a time when other kings went out to conquer, did David still have a need to conquer, if not in battle then with Bathsheba? We do not know for sure, of course, and perhaps David did not know, but the imagery of conquering is important for the leader to consider. Seduced by his own power (not by Bathsheba), David conquers Bathsheba. The scene of his looking down upon her (from his roof) is telling. David is the master of all he surveys. He is a well-known public figure. He is the ruler of the nation. He gets what he wants.

Bill Creech recognizes the power differential between people such as David and Bathsheba (the leader and subordinate) when he discusses the flow of decisions and principles. Creech writes: “Principles flow from the top down, decisions from the bottom up.”⁶ While Creech is arguing for decentralized forms of leadership, he is cognizant of the tremendous influence leaders have over others. They have fundamental responsibility for the principles that govern an organization. The implication of Creech’s statement about the flow of principles is apparent when we see how David’s children abuse their power in ways similar to the way David abused his power in this story (see 2 Sam 13:1-19).

Today, issues of sexual harassment are in the forefront for people with authority. Certainly a contemporary David would be in public and legal trouble for having sex with Bathsheba. The political, social, and personal power differential between David and Bathsheba is too great for there to be mutual consent. There cannot be valid consent, Lebacqz and Barton point out, when such a “power gap” exists.⁷ Rutter writes, “The belief that women are being seductive...when they are exploited, is pure male fantasy.”⁸ David abused his power. The core of professional ethics lies in the recognition of this power imbalance. The leader’s role, not merely his personal ethics, demands not abusing the difference in power.

Clearly in the early part of this story David is not being honest with himself or with Bathsheba. Deceiving himself about the implications of this seduction on his life, Bathsheba’s life, and the nation’s life, David is blind to the long-term consequences that subsequent stories describe.

Peter Senge writes that leaders who are effective are “committed to telling the truth.”⁹ Here, truth would require “recognizing the conflicting behaviors” in which

⁵Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) 273.

⁶Bill Creech, *The Five Pillars of TQM: How to Make Total Quality Management Work for You* (New York: Truman Talley, 1994) 297.

⁷Lebacqz and Barton, *Sex in the Parish*, 119.

⁸Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, 69.

⁹Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of Leadership* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 159.

David is engaged. David, in this story, is oblivious to what his actions will mean for the larger community and his own heirs.

This brings us to an important caution. Senge argues that the leader should not simply see problems as the result of an individual failure. Leaders, he says, should look beyond the individual to the system at work behind an individual's failure. This perspective will often unearth other causes of the events. At the risk of absolving the king (or the leader) of responsibility for personal behavior, we ought to consider the wisdom of Senge's insight in the context of David and Bathsheba.

Roland Capps has written persuasively on this topic in light of recent efforts by church denominations to take a more proactive stand in curbing clergy from engaging in exploitative sexual relationships.¹⁰ He is particularly concerned that clergy who are accused of such misconduct tend to have no advocates within the church to protect their rights and to protect them from abuse the system might impose.

Neither Senge nor Capps seeks to absolve the leader from reprehensible behavior. However, both urge us to look beyond the individual to the underlying system that may promote such behavior. Capps describes the sociological phenomenon called "scapegoating," where an individual is placed in a position to take the blame that would otherwise force an organization to face its incipient problems. Sometimes secondary problems enable organizations to avoid facing larger underlying problems. Leaders ought to recognize the sociological dynamics being played out in an organization, dynamics that may exert pressure to do that which is wrong, even in the realm of sexual misconduct.

In the early stages of this story we have seen David's vulnerability to self-deception and blindness. David, in his role as leader, is deceived about and blind to the magnitude of his responsibility and perhaps to his ability to control an alluring situation. This personal responsibility can also be held in tension with an organization system (divine right of kings?) that may encourage irresponsibility. As the story continues, David's complicity and abuse of power increases.

II. 2 SAMUEL 11:5-27b

David's "little" seduction produces more and bigger problems. Bathsheba is pregnant. Abortion is out of the question. Hiding what has happened will be difficult. The consequence of David's abuse of his power and abuse of Bathsheba provide a dramatic, if negative, illustration of two principles Senge seeks to impart to the student of systems theory and leadership. One such principle is that small actions will reap big changes or reactions. Another is that pushing hard for a cure is often worse than the disease.¹¹

¹⁰Roland Capps, "Sex in the Parish: Social Scientific Explanations for Why It Occurs," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 47/4 (1993) 358-360.

¹¹Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 60, 63.

David is not yet ready to take responsibility for his part in this problem. Senge's words are appropriate here: "Whoever refuses to admit error is not a great learner."¹² Maybe David's vanity suggested that Bathsheba was attracted to him and the affair was mutual. As David tries to cover up his misdeed, he illustrates another social dynamic that the wise leader must recognize in himself or herself and in others: "saving face."

Folger, Poole, and Stutman explain "face" in a helpful way:

The concept of face originated in China as early as the 4th century B.C. [A Chinese word for face is] *lein*. *Lein* stands for good moral character. A person does not achieve *lein* but rather is ascribed this quality unless he or she behaves in a socially unacceptable manner. To have no *lein* means to have no integrity and is perhaps the most serious condemnation that can be made of a person.¹³

The authors go on to point out that loss of face can result from any of several negative behaviors done as defensive attempts to save face. Clearly David will publicly lose *lein* once Bathsheba's pregnancy becomes known. This will have disastrous consequences for him, not only as a leader, but as a leader who was rightly admired for having great *lein*.

Up to this point, we have not stopped to consider that Bathsheba is married. The points already made about the dynamics of power and David's abuse of power are valid whether or not the woman is married. With Bathsheba's pregnancy, however, her marriage becomes an important consideration. Initially David may have said to himself, "What two adults do in private is no one else's business." But David's seduction of Bathsheba became the nation's business when David tried to keep it "private" and save face.

The ethics of the workplace hold those with greater power responsible, eliminating the notion that an office indiscretion is a private matter between two adults. The more David pushed and tried to keep private his abuse of power, the more he abused his power to the point where that abuse became incredibly outrageous and severely hurtful.

David called Bathsheba's husband Uriah home from battle with the expectation that Uriah would have coital intimacy with his wife. Uriah would then have become the scapegoat for Bathsheba's pregnancy. Unfortunately for Uriah, he did not do what David had hoped. Like Uriah's friends who were still in battle, he slept outside on the cold hard ground, not at home with his wife. Such a gesture, no doubt, gave Uriah great *lein*.

David now panicked. This is a common reaction when saving face becomes the issue. Leaders are reminded that their own emotional issues influence their ability to lead others. In his panic, David remembered the crafty way Saul had tried to kill him (1 Sam 18:25). David sent word to have Uriah put in a dangerous posi-

¹²Ibid., 313.

¹³J. P. Folger, M. S. Poole, and R. Stutman, *Working through Conflict: A Communication Perspective* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1993) 128-129.

tion on the field of battle where surely he would die. Uriah did die, as David had hoped. David's *lein* was saved. He was free to take Bathsheba as his wife. His impregnating her would appear to be legitimate. David's affair could appear to remain a simple matter between two consenting adults in a legitimate relationship. After the obligatory period of mourning, David did take Bathsheba as his wife. The chapter ends as though David's cover-up, though terrible in its price, will succeed.

We turn to Robert Greenleaf for his wisdom at this point in our story. He is aware of and sensitive to people's common frustration with institutional bureaucracy. After expressing empathy for this common experience, Greenleaf counters that institutions serve an important function by providing oversight of those with power. Greenleaf writes, "In essence, this view [the value of institutions] holds that no one, *absolutely no one*, is to be entrusted with the operational use of power without the close oversight of trustees [others]."¹⁴ This wisdom applies to all leaders, including people of the caliber of David. All leaders need oversight lest their power extend too far and go to their heads. While David did not have a Parliament, Congress, or a Supreme Court to hold him accountable, he did have the "close oversight" of God through the prophet Nathan. David forgot what no leader must forget: accountability is fundamental to leadership.

The secret that David tried to hide could not remain a secret. David had found himself in a trap that Senge describes as the trap of defensive routines.¹⁵ The more we become defensive in an effort to save face, the more we become trapped. The consequences of his actions appeared to David to be contained, at least in his own mind. But Nathan is about to visit David, a visit that David will never forget.

III. 2 SAMUEL 11:27c-12:13a

Issues of face are involved in Nathan's story about a poor man's ewe being taken by a rich man to feed a traveler. The relationship between David and the Lord (trustees) and David and the nation (organization) had been violated. David's face-saving actions ate away at the soul of relationships, weakening the foundation needed for the nation to flourish. If relationships were to be restored, the secret would have to be brought out into the open. Without such a reestablished bond, the needed leadership would be lost.

Leaders have the responsibility to lead groups of people through a variety of circumstances, including the responsibility to lead soulfully when they are the center of the problem. One cannot be a great leader unless one can admit error. David, the leader in our story, had tried to deny a reality that Creech describes: "The more complex the world becomes, the more complex core values become."¹⁶ Greater complexity came with David's and the nation's success. With greater complexity,

¹⁴Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist, 1977) 104.

¹⁵Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 181.

¹⁶Creech, *The Five Pillars of TQM*, 360.

the leader became more isolated (recall that David was not where all the other kings were, fighting battles). With increased isolation, holding core values became even more important. This is the underlying sociological challenge: greater complexity leads to greater isolation, which makes moral integrity more difficult but no less important.

The story before us clearly demonstrates one value of literature. Story allows the listener to experience vicariously the truth being illustrated. When David's misdeeds were told metaphorically in a story apart from him, David could clearly see deceptiveness and offered harsh judgement. When told, "You are the man," David saw himself.

As the prophet of the Lord, Nathan's actions are an illustration of Howard Gardner's effective leader, one who "confronted others [David] in positions of authority on equal terms."¹⁷ He fulfills the role of trustee as defined by Greenleaf: "Trustees have the obligation to oversee the use of power in order to check its corrupting influence on those to whom it is entrusted." Later Greenleaf also points out that "trustees need to be mostly critical because it is the scrutiny of a critical attitude that keeps administrators and staff on a true course."¹⁸

Nathan did not soften the blow. In Nathan, David found a spiritual person who would see and name what he had done. David could now accurately confess his violation (v.13), and begin trying to patch things together.

Notice that David confessed to his priest/prophet, not to others. Sometimes confessing sin to the wrong person hinders restoration. Confession should be made to an appropriate person who can also provide guidance. For David, Nathan was such a guide. With Nathan's involvement, David is no longer isolated. He also has someone who inspires him to a renewed trust in principle-centered living.

These stories vividly show how vulnerable the leader is to abuse of power. It often first appears as a simple private affair, but quickly escalates. Not even David, with all his piety and shrewdness, could manage the negative escalation of his abuse of power. David ultimately tries to mend what has been broken by his lack of principled behaviors and judgments.

IV. PSALM 51

Psalm 51 is attributed to David after his secret came into the open as a result of Nathan's confrontation. David's abuse of power was of such a degree that in today's world he would have no official leadership function and role remaining. Despite the differences between then and now, the psalm does serve as an appropriate reminder of a function of leadership.

As we pointed out earlier, principles ought to flow from the top down. Psalm 51 became a model of confession for the nation of Israel and for subsequent generations. It boldly communicates important principles, including the vulnerability

¹⁷Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 253.

¹⁸Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 103, 106.

most leaders have to the abuse of power. Insight of this kind, the psalm suggests, is a value that ought to be self-sustaining, something Senge commends.¹⁹ By incorporating the psalm (principled truth artistically communicated) into the nation's worship life (corporate ritual), David provides leadership in helping to sustain positive values. Leaders can learn from David the need to find ways to keep important values up-front in the corporate consciousness.

The psalm further illustrates other considerations for the leader. Again we turn to Senge to make explicit what has been implied. An organization has character. To use symbols, such as Psalm 51, invokes an ethic and defines the values of the organization. The organization's ethical character is determined, in part, by the organization's "ability to face shifting the burden of responsibility."²⁰ Finding scapegoats undermines organizational character. Facing its responsibility establishes ethical character.

Leadership is not just about other people. It is also about the inner life of the leader. It is not just about the private side of life, but also about the manner in which a leader leads by example. Leadership is both a private and a public affair. Notice David's awareness of himself in verse six: "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart." David is now aware of the origin of his self-deception. He is aware of that within himself that provided the motivations for what he did. He here attends to what is in need of healing and guidance. The leader's core values affect the organization. David's prayer for wisdom in his secret heart reflects slowing down the pace of his thoughts so that this central part of himself, the source of discontent and arrogance, cannot so easily be deceived and instead can become the place of strength and commitment leading to goodness and power. This is the place from which "acceptable sacrifice" [of ego] originates (v. 17).

We also ought to note that the psalm is a work of art that has survived centuries of use. Even today it is a treasured part of countless persons' lives. In developing such a beautiful expression, David "dispels chaos with creativity."²¹ David's creativity in singing the psalm illustrates that leadership can be and is a form of art. In this form, the leader can face self-deception and refuse to scapegoat others for her or his failures.

Those who have read the stories about David in the Bible are well aware that even the confession of Psalm 51 did not remove the consequences of David's abuse of power and the ensuing harm to others and to the nation. His remaining years in leadership are largely occupied with the consequences of these events—a telling reminder to pastors and leaders to attend to issues of leadership and power. ⊕

¹⁹Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 286.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 110.

²¹Dispelling "chaos with creativity" is an essential task of leadership according to Margaret Wheatly, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992) 121.