

## DAVID AND BATHSHEBA: BIBLICAL SOAP OPERA

If you go for sex and violence, try the story of David and Bathsheba. You'll find it in the Jewish scripture at 2 Samuel 11-12. There's more intrigue, dirty dealing and down-right nastiness here than I most TV soap operas.

The story is set against the background of one of those interminable intermittent border wars in the Near East. In this case, however, King David remained at headquarters while his troops were in the field.

One afternoon he was trying to catch a cool breeze on the roof of the palace. Then he spotted Bathsheba on the roof of her own house, which must have been a block or so down the hill. She was taking a bath.

David liked what he saw and sent a note to her. So Bathsheba joined the king at the palace. Whether theirs was a one-night stand or a longer affair, the results were just what you would expect: Soon she was pregnant.

In those days such royal hanky-panky wasn't all that unusual. Oriental kings often had numerous wives and concubines. But in this case the matter was complicated by the fact that Bathsheba was already married. In fact, her husband, a fellow named Uriah, was a lieutenant among the troops deployed on the eastern front.

David was no dummy; he had it all figured out. He would send orders via his field general to have Uriah returned to the capital, ostensibly to report on the success of the war effort.

The idea was for Uriah to report to the king, spend a night at home with his wife Bathsheba, and then return to the front. In the months to come the court gossips would assume that Uriah was the father of Bathsheba's child.

However, the best laid plans often go amuck. Uriah reported back as planned. But he did not spend the night making love to his wife. Instead he slept at the palace barracks. "How could I go home to wine and dine and bed my wife," he reasoned, "while my troops are stuck in the trenches?"

David didn't give up. He held his lieutenant over another day invited him to supper, and got him stinking drunk. But again the soldier slept with the palace guards, not with his wife.

Things were getting desperate. This time David wrote a note to his general and sent it back with Uriah. The unsuspecting lieutenant carried these instructions: "Put Uriah in the thickest fighting; then call a quick retreat."

David's general carried out the orders to a T. The lieutenant led the charge into the enemy's strongest position and was killed in action.

There's more to the story: how David made an honest woman of Bathsheba by marrying her, how the Lord's prophet wrong a confession out of the king, how the son they had conceived died a few days after birth. But this should be enough to ser the appetites of any soap opera fans.

What we have here is no little blot on the reputation of one of Israel's most famous kings. David the former shepherd boy, the heroic slayer of giants, the builder of Jerusalem, the musician and psalmist, implicated in the twin crimes of adultery and murder!

It's to the credit of the ancient biblical authors that they kept this story in. It would have been all too easy to scissored this sordid episode out.

(In fact, that's exactly what happened in another book. 1 Chronicles repeats the events of 2 Samuel paragraph for paragraph. But between 1 Chronicles 19 and 20, right where this incident should be, there's not a word.)

How refreshing to note the honesty of the biblical writer. He could have shown us nothing but David's good side. Instead, he balanced the picture with an unflinching look at the king's worst side. The point is clear: Even famous kings aren't above God's justice.

Or perhaps the story teller had another axe to grind. Perhaps he was suggesting that God has a way of doing God's good thing even if God's people are out and out scoundrels.

In any event, the David and Bathsheba affair has a lot more going for it than many soaps.

[FILE 14]