

MANAGING A ROYAL SEX ABUSE SCANDAL¹: How three religious traditions have dealt with the David and Bathsheba story.

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Abstract

Managing sex abuse scandals is a challenge for many contemporary institutions, including churches, synagogues, madrassas, schools and youth groups. Some religious bodies, however, already have considerable experience in managing scandals – their sacred texts are full of dangerous stories that have shocked and challenged them over many centuries. The story of David and Bathsheba, for example, combines three themes central to the current crisis - sexual exploitation, abuse of power and attempted cover-up. This article provides an analysis of how three faith communities - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - have ‘managed’ the story of King David’s adultery with Bathsheba and assassination of her husband, Uriah, and the subsequent litany of rape and murder, possibly also incest, within the royal House. David’s legacy is central to the three traditions - he is a founding father of Judaism, a forbear of the Christian Messiah and a prophet for Islam.

Studies of individual delinquents document strategies of rationalisation, including denial of responsibility for harm, accusing the accusers and finding a ‘greater good’ from the incident. Organisational theorists who examine institutional scandals document a similar range of strategies, distinguishing ‘rogue’ organisations that seek to excuse their behaviour, and ‘redemptive’ organisations that are willing to take responsibility and mend their ways. The three traditions display mixtures of the two approaches as they have retold the story of David and Bathsheba for new audiences.

What is missing in many of the versions of the story, however, are two features that make the original story so confronting: the offence was a sovereign crime not an individual indiscretion; and the king was checked by a countervailing power, the prophet Nathan.² By ignoring the institutional context of the crime and forgetting Nathan, the story becomes tame and manageable. There were, however, exceptions to this pattern. The Qur’an turned the whole story into a treatise on abuse of power, while a sermon by Machiavelli resulted in a debate about accountability. Scandals such as this can also be seen as opportunities for developing new norms. By reading the principles of sovereignty and accountability back into the story, its truly scandalous character can be recognised, opening up the possibility of new ways of thinking about the current crisis.

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² The term ‘original’ is used to refer to the earliest written account of the story in 2 Samuel in the Hebrew Bible (Coogan et al (2007)).

Introduction

Almost every religious organisation seems to be beset by sex abuse scandals. In the Catholic Church, secret payouts reportedly tried to silence victims of sexual misconduct by Catholic clergy, bishops were forced out of office, and Pope Benedict XVI was arguably spurred into resignation for his role in covering up sexual abuse by priests.³ Some 4 per cent of US Catholic priests in office between 1950 and 2002 were estimated to be implicated in sex abuse of minors.⁴ The Australian Governor-General resigned in 2003 after revelations about his cover up of a sex abuse case as Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane became known⁵. Sex abuse is reported to be endemic in Jewish communities, Koran teachers in mosques were jailed for abusing their pupils, and the Jehovah's Witnesses church faces large payouts in a child molestation case.⁶ An internationally renowned Hindu guru was charged with taking advantage of his disciples near Bangalore, a South Korean sect leader was imprisoned for engaging in 'purification rituals' on his female followers, a Tibetan lama is under investigation for abusing young Western women, while a Buddhist community in Manhattan faces its own sex abuse investigation.⁷ The Australian Government set up a royal commission to investigate the problem. A consistent pattern emerges in these stories – an authority figure abuses those who trusted them, others turn a blind eye, while leaders of the organisation attempt to cover up the incidents. The age and gender profile of the victims varies, but the victims are typically under the authority or tutelage of the offender and the incidents occur within organisations committed to worthy objectives like teaching moral principles and inspiring virtuous behaviour.

³ For the case to hold Pope Benedict accountable see Robertson (2010). The issue was sufficiently sensitive for the Pope Emeritus for him to break his self-imposed silence to refute the claims; see Nick Squires, Former Pope Breaks Silence to Deny Sexual Abuse Cover-Up, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 2013,

<http://www.smh.com.au/world/former-pope-breaks-silence-to-deny-sexual-abuse-coverup-20130925-2uecx.html>, [last accessed 29 September 2013].

⁴ John Jay College of Criminal Justice (2004), p 4.

⁵ Baird (2009), p 65.

⁶ Sex Abuse Endemic, Enquiry Hears, *Jewish News*, 18 December 2012, <http://www.jewishnews.net.au/sex-abuse-endemic-enquiry-hears/28805>, [last accessed 3 May 2013];

Wellingborough Imam Sexually Assaulted Two Children, *BBC News*, 11 July 2012, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-northamptonshire-18798069, [last accessed 3 May 2013]; Jail for Sex Abuse Mosque Teacher, *BBC News*, 19 December 2008,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/edinburgh_and_east/7791604.stm

[last accessed 3 May 2013]; Jehovah's Witnesses Told to Pay in Abuse Case, *New York Times*, June 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/us/28-million-awarded-in-jehovahs-witnesses-abuse-case.html> [last accessed 3 May 2013]. Neustein (2009).

⁷ India Sex Scandal Guru Arrested, *BBC News*, 21 April 2010,

www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8634696.stm [last accessed 3 May 2013]; Cult Leader Gets 6-year Prison Term, *KoreanPress.com*, 13 September 2008, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/117_29224.html [last accessed 3 May 2013];

Mary Finnigan, Lama Sex Abuse Claims Call Buddhist Taboos Into Question, *Guardian.co.uk*, 1 July 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/jul/01/lama-sex-abuse-sogyal-rinpoche-buddhist> [last accessed 3 May 2013]; Mark Oppenheimer, Sex Scandal Has US Buddhists Looking Within, *New York Times*, 20 August 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html [last accessed 3 May 2013].

Few sex scandals have attracted such ongoing fascination as that reported in the second book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible involving King David and the bathing woman he spied from his palace roof, Bathsheba.⁸ The story shocked those who expect leaders to set an example of virtue, it inspired artists and writers of every generation, and it provides a convenient precedent for other leaders caught in embarrassing situations. The story may also offer an insight into the way religious traditions have 'managed' a previous sex abuse scandal, in this case one that is part of their historical legacy. Interpreting sacred texts is part of 'core business' for many religious organisations; it is an area where they can be expected to have particular expertise. The way they read canonical texts may help to shape their identity, define their beliefs and distinguish them from competing organisations. Literary interpretation is particularly important for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, aptly called the Peoples of the Book, who derive their own authority in part from revelations that are recorded and transmitted in written form. So an examination of how the three faith traditions deal with a sex abuse scandal that is part of their literary canon may shed light on their current predicament. Three features of the story give it particular resonance with current debates – illicit sex, abuse of authority and attempted cover-up.

What makes the story of David and Bathsheba particularly useful for such an exercise is that it has been managed somewhat differently between and within the three monotheistic religions. As they made it their own, by embellishing, modifying and selecting from the material they received, different communities or authors each put their own distinctive stamp on the scandal. The reception history of the scandal thus provides a rich database of expositions, strategies and insights. This article provides a general framework for interpreting the way stories develop, reviews the special case of scandal stories, and offers an analysis of the David and Bathsheba scandal story as it was appropriated by the three monotheistic traditions. The conclusion summarises the different trajectory the story took in the three traditions, identifying a feature that most variants leave out, the role of the prophet Nathan and more generally the sovereign nature of the crime.

Theoretical framework:

The reception history of stories

Stories develop to meet changing contexts and audiences. When workers recalled Fascist-era Turin, many critical events were omitted from their stories; we learn as much from the silences as the speech.⁹ Stories were deployed to address current issues, whether by modifying the story to keep it relevant, or omitting uncomfortable memories. The post-war Italian Communist Party, for example, elevated Luigi Trastulli to the status of martyr.¹⁰ The unfortunate Trastulli was crushed in an anti-NATO demonstration in 1949, but in the mythology of the Party was given four more years of life and died in 1953, no longer in a foreign policy dispute because Party views on this had changed. Rather, his new more

⁸ 2 Samuel, 12. Biblical references list book, chapter, verse. Where Jewish and Christian Bibles differ in numbering, this is pointed out.

⁹ Passerini (1987), p 21.

¹⁰ Portelli (1991), p 2.

glorious death was connected to the mass sackings associated with industrial restructuring. The story was based on a particular incident, but soon took on new meaning to meet the emerging needs of an organisation.

Some three centuries earlier the Earl of Castlehaven had been put on trial in England for rape and sodomy¹¹. He had formed a close relationship with a male servant to whom he gave generous gifts, and encouraged other servants to sleep with his wife. Action was initiated by Castlehaven's son who apparently feared for his inheritance. The Earl was convicted by majority verdict of an aristocratic jury and beheaded. The meaning of the story shifted across the next two centuries. It was variously seen as punishment for someone who failed to keep his own household in order, a case of behaviour threatening legitimate inheritance, an illustration of the debauchery typical of Irish Catholicism, an act of gross injustice brought by the tyrannical monarch Charles I against an honest subject, and an example of aristocratic vice.¹² Unlike the Trastulli story, which quickly settled into a stable interpretation, the reception history of the Castlehaven story continued to display new uses and meanings.

Alternative versions of stories may flourish in different locations as different groups take ownership of them. Fairy stories, for example, take on national flavours – with Italians using humour, German stories preferring gratuitous violence, English versions including sturdy yeomen and French versions being organised around tricksters and subverting authority.¹³ The story of Jael and Sisera – in which Jael lures the enemy leader into her tent and hammers a tent peg through his head while he was asleep - is told twice in the Book of Judges in the Hebrew Bible, once in poetry and later in prose.¹⁴ In Mieke Bal's reading of the two versions, the first celebrates the role of strong women in a pre-agricultural society and – like later French fairy stories – delights in trickery. The prose version squeezes out Jael from the centre of the narrative and introduces a newer code of hospitality. The difference between the stories allowed Bal to identify some of the key shifts in values and attitudes between the two periods.

Unlike the Trastulli story, which became a source of inspiration for a single party, or the Jael stories told in two settings, stories about David were re-told in many historical contexts, and by different faith communities. Like the fairy stories of European mythology the story was modified to meet changing needs and cultural contexts.

Managing scandals

A classic form of story is the scandal, illustrated in the Castlehaven case. Scandals can be defined as sustained public outrage in response to particular events, objects or ideas that are seen as illegal or immoral.¹⁵ The behaviour shocks the audience. The specific subject matter of a scandal may vary, but most scandals involve sex, violence, breach of responsibility, or

¹¹ Herrup (1999), p 26-30.

¹² Herrup (1999), p 1-11.

¹³ Darnton (1984), p 9-74.

¹⁴ Bal (1988), p 16-25.

¹⁵ Toepfl (2011), p 1303; Jiang et al (2011), p 207.

financial fraud; often more than one.¹⁶ A scandal may be heightened when it highlights a discrepancy between a person's cultivated image and the more colourful reality of their lives.¹⁷ It may be deepened when the net extends to include those who tried to cover up the initial scandal.¹⁸ By this definition crimes that are undetected or unreported (JFK's trysts) would not be classified as scandals, nor behaviour which to us might seem outrageous but evoked no outrage amongst contemporaries (cat massacres).¹⁹ Some behaviour might be classified as scandalous only in retrospect, such as state child removal policies or slavery.

Individual delinquents typically rationalise their behaviour using a number of strategies. These include denying that the incident happened, disputing one's own responsibility for it, playing down the harm caused, turning the spotlight on the accusers and finding a 'greater good' from the incident.²⁰ 'Rogue' organisations follow a similar range of strategies in trying to manage organisational scandals.²¹ 'Redemptive' organizations by contrast (like reformed delinquents) try to minimize harm caused by the issue, accept responsibility, and change the social environment.²²

While scandals may be seen as examples of deviance, or departures from normal behaviour, they might also be seen as opportunities for shaping social norms, changing mores and even establishing new paradigms.²³ Indeed a scandal can provide a moment of 'liminality' that 'utters, shatters, destroys and creates'.²⁴ Telling scandal stories may construct 'bridges to the future' that potentially call a new world into being, threatening existing hierarchies.²⁵ The rape of Lucretia could be seen as such an event, leading to the foundation of the Roman Republic.²⁶ Such scandals may help to challenge conventional wisdom and create new institutions.

The story

At the time of year when kings go off to war, we are told in the second book of Samuel, David is instead ogling the neighbours from the roof of his palace.²⁷ He spies a beautiful woman bathing. She turns out to be Bathsheba, whose husband Uriah is away on the battlefield. David sends messengers to get her to join him; some time later she announces that she is pregnant. Her husband is summoned back from battle to cover up the matter, he

¹⁶ Adut (2008). chapter 1

¹⁷ Adut (2004), p 534.

¹⁸ Custance et al (2012), p 23; Gross (2011), p 14.

¹⁹ Darnton (1984), p 77.

²⁰ Sykes and Matza (1957), p 667-670.

²¹ Shupe (2008), p 9; Coombs (1995), p 450.

²² De Maria (2010), p 71; Shrivastava and Mitroff (1987).

²³ Jagannathan and Camasso (2011), p 895; Adut (2004), p 565.

²⁴ Brueggemann (1990), p 246. It is not necessary for there to be an exact match between the details of the initial scandal and the way it is used in public debates – any more than Nathan's parable exactly matched David's crime, see Ackerman (1990), p 49. An anonymous reviewer correctly points out that while Bathsheba is portrayed as an adult, many of the victims in the current crisis are minors.

²⁵ Cover (1984), p 182.

²⁶ Matthes (2000), p 5.

²⁷ 2 Samuel 11:1

refuses, and is given a letter - in effect his own death warrant - to give to his commander, Joab. Uriah is duly killed, and the king marries Bathsheba. But the child of the union dies. David's eldest son Amnon rapes his own sister Tamar, in revenge Amnon is killed by the king's favourite son, Absalom, who then in turn rebels against his father, sleeping with the royal harem in public, and seizing the kingdom. Absalom is eventually killed after his hair is caught in a tree.

Until the incident with Bathsheba, David has been something of a model king. He is a musician, playing the harp to soothe the cares of the first king of Israel, Saul. He has military prowess, killing the giant Goliath, champion of the Philistines. He becomes military commander of Saul's army and marries Saul's daughter, Michal, after being set the formidable task of getting 100 Philistine foreskins. As king he moves the capital of the kingdom to Jerusalem, the new capital of the United Kingdom.

The affair with Bathsheba marks a dramatic change in his fortunes. After David marries Bathsheba, he receives a visit from the prophet Nathan.²⁸ Nathan tells David an innocuous-sounding story about two men, one who had many sheep and one who had only one. The rich man took the poor man's sheep to prepare a feast. What did David think of that? David declares that the guilty person must not only pay fourfold for the crime, he 'must die'.²⁹ Nathan retorts 'you are the man'.³⁰ Nathan tells him that as king he has been given many gifts, including wives. If 'all this had been too little', God 'would have given you even more' Nathan declares.³¹ David repents profusely and is told he will not die. But his household will turn against him. He had Uriah killed by the sword, 'the sword' will never thereafter leave his House. And so the prophecies come to pass. After the litany of tragedy and violence predicted by Nathan, David eventually returns as king, much diminished. He commits one further major sin, taking a military census, against the advice of his military leader Joab, thereby doubting the divine promise that blessings given to the nation would be too numerous to count. Bathsheba however, in an apparent conspiracy with Nathan manages to trick David into giving her son Solomon the throne on his deathbed.³² David, who repents so profoundly for his targeted assassination of Uriah, instructs Solomon with his dying breath to assassinate Joab, who had connived with him in the death of Uriah.³³

As a scandal story, the David-Bathsheba tale skilfully weaves together voyeurism, seduction, betrayal, murder, rape, incest,³⁴ fratricide and deception into a complex but compelling

²⁸ 2 Samuel 12:1

²⁹ 2 Samuel 12:15

³⁰ 2 Samuel 12:17

³¹ 2 Samuel 12:8

³² 1 Kings 1:11-37; Fuchs (2000), p 143; Marcus (1986).

³³ 1 Kings 2:29-34

³⁴ As shown below, there are disputes between the different traditions about which offences are involved, with Islamic sources stopping with the death of Uriah and denying any sexual misbehaviour. Sex between siblings, such as Amnon and his half-sister Tamar, was not considered incest according to contemporary standards, as Tamar herself says in urging Amnon to get David's permission (2 Samuel 13). What makes it arguably incest for this analysis was how it was regarded

narrative. David neglects his responsibilities as king – what was he doing on the roof of his palace rather than leading his troops? He betrays one of his most loyal officers, and then abuses his authority as commander in chief to get him killed. Despite his supposed wisdom, he is gullible, falling for Nathan’s clever little parable.³⁵ He is a terrible father, failing to protect his daughter from sexual assault, and in the process losing the loyalty of his favourite son who turns against him.³⁶ So he breaches not just his kingly responsibilities, but the military code, masculine honour and parental duty.

The story in historical and literary context

There is no independent evidence for the story.³⁷ Archaeological evidence sees David, if he existed at all, as a bandit chief, wandering around the countryside plundering, fighting, collecting concubines and razing villages.³⁸ Several centuries later, many of the stories were compiled and written up under King Josiah.³⁹ This scribal activity marked the first period of writing and compilation of the texts that would become the Hebrew Bible. The next period was in captivity in Babylon – where some of the stories about David were written or re-worked; another when the Temple was rebuilt under Persian rule. Understandably many of the stories borrowed details from the period they were compiled, or the previous century, although they drew from sources that are much older.⁴⁰ There is no evidence of a large building program under David, so probably no palace. Most of the military victories and building programs have some historical foundation – they were the successes of a rival dynasty, the Omrides kings of the following century, not of David or Solomon.

Regardless of the historical origins of the stories, David is undoubtedly one of the key figures in the Hebrew Bible, initially as the king who established the united monarchy of Israel and Judah, and subsequently as the founder of the cult based on the Temple, and focus of messianic expectations.⁴¹ Extensive scholarship has investigated David’s literary significance within the canonical texts.⁴² Comparative analyses, looking at borrowings between traditions,

by later commentators. As Calvin described the matter in a sermon on 2 Samuel 13, ‘[h]ere is a case of incest.’ See Witte and Kingdon (2005), p 340.

³⁵ David’s ‘wisdom’ or lack of it, is an important part of the story. When a wise woman of Tekoa approached him with a parable (which tricked him in condemning himself, this time for the exile of Absalom), she flattered him with the words: ‘My lord has wisdom like that of an angel of God.’ 2 Samuel 14:20

³⁶ Schwartz (1992), p 143-144, 148.

³⁷ The summary follows Finkelstein and Silberman (2006). chapters 1 and 3.

³⁸ David Bosworth provides a comprehensive literature review of the negative portraits of King David’s life painted in the scholarly literature: Bosworth (2006).

³⁹ Davis (2007), p 194.

⁴⁰ Bruns (1984). provides an account of the process of compilation.

⁴¹ Schniedewind (1999), p 3.

⁴² The most prominent authors who examine the literary traditions of David stories include: Beal and Camp (2010); Fewell (1992); Good (1965); Clines (1995); Alter (2000); Gunn (1978).

has been undertaken for subsequent Jewish and Islamic texts⁴³ and Christian and rabbinical sources.⁴⁴

There are a range of possible links and patterns that may connect this story to others in the Hebrew Bible. Within David's own biography, his encounter with Bathsheba is seen alternatively as an 'intrusion' into an otherwise positive picture of David aiming to discredit him,⁴⁵ or alternatively a critical part of a court history that established the legitimacy of the Davidic line.⁴⁶ The story can be seen as twinned with the story of Adam and Eve,⁴⁷ both men were tempted by women, both took what was forbidden to them,⁴⁸ and David's son Absalom replicated the fratricide of Cain. But whereas Adam was told 'you will die' - he would be mortal - David was assured 'you will not die'. Eve would become the bearer of life for the human race while Bathsheba would give life to the new dynasty of Israel.⁴⁹ The David-Bathsheba story can also be juxtaposed to the story of Moses and his followers-- just as Moses would not lead his followers into the Promised Land because of their disobedience, so too David would not build the Temple because of his sin.⁵⁰ Abraham and David have also been linked as recipients of a divine promise – both would be fathers of a new nation.⁵¹

The behaviour of a dissolute king can be read as a counterpoint to a prophecy of Samuel warning of the dangers of kingship.⁵² Or from the later perspective of a history of failed kings, it can be seen as offering the model of an ideal prophet – Nathan.⁵³ The story is classified as the first of seven 'judgment oracles' referring to the House of David, which balance promises with curses.⁵⁴ For David, while the 'sword' might never leave his House, a parallel promise pledged that 'mercy' would never leave his House either.⁵⁵ David's case distinguishes itself by the profuse repentance expressed, something Adam or Cain never quite managed.

In the Book of Kings, David is presented as the model king, one with whom all subsequent monarchs are compared.⁵⁶ He is held up as someone without sin, that is 'except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite'.⁵⁷ This 'matter' is not mentioned in the second major telling of the life of David in the first book of Chronicles. However the sin of census-taking is noted which results in a plague after David was given a choice between three punishments. The psalms,

⁴³ Déclais (1999).

⁴⁴ Steenbrink (2006), p 351; Miura (2007).

⁴⁵ McKenzie (2000), p 35.

⁴⁶ Flanagan (1972).

⁴⁷ Klitsner (2011); Segal (2012).

⁴⁸ The analysis of the David story as being about 'taking' is developed most fully by Janzen (2012).

⁴⁹ Von Rad (1973), p 96.

⁵⁰ Numbers 20:24; Clines (1997).

⁵¹ Lundbom (1983), p 206.

⁵² For another interpretation, that Samuel may have been preferred for his corrupt sons to remain as leaders instead of anointing a king see: Polzin (1989).

⁵³ Flynn (2012).

⁵⁴ Lamb (2010), p 316-325.

⁵⁵ The pair of promises made to David are at 2 Samuel 7 and 12.

⁵⁶ Frisch (2011), p 11.

⁵⁷ 1 Kings 15:5.

particularly the seven referred to as the ‘penitential’ psalms provide commentary on David’s contrition, the tribulations which arose from his affair and the census, and the depths of despair he experienced.⁵⁸ The preface to Psalm 51 records it was written by David ‘when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba’.⁵⁹

David’s story, it can be argued, presents something of a microcosm of the Hebrew Bible, bringing together the book’s major themes of promise, disobedience, judgment, deferral promised reward, exile and return.⁶⁰

Transmission of the Story

The Jewish Tradition

Within Judaism, David is a key figure, though as a religious leader portrayed by the Chronicler and the poet revealed in the Psalms rather than the political figure found in the books of Samuel. Indeed the story of David and Bathsheba, together with a number of other problematic texts, could not be read aloud in public liturgies.⁶¹

One influential writer who brings Jewish history to a wider audience was Josephus, whose history of the Jewish people includes a lengthy account of David’s life, including the relationship with Bathsheba.⁶² David is a ‘righteous and religious man’, and a prophet, completely without sin ‘excepting in the matter of Uriah’.⁶³ In Josephus’s account, Nathan tells his parable about the sheep, editorialising about the dangers of kings succumbing to passion. But once David repents and is forgiven, God is no longer displeased with him.⁶⁴

The Talmud, developed between the first and fifth centuries CE, brought together the oral law and its interpretation by different rabbis.⁶⁵ David is portrayed as the model penitent. He is led to sin to learn repentance, elevating ‘the yoke of repentance’, thereby setting a model for others.⁶⁶ Bathsheba enters the story when David tries to secure his place in history. David asks God why he is not listed as one of the patriarchs - when people incant the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they fail to add ‘and David’.⁶⁷ The other three had been given a test, so David is now given his. It will involve, God tells him, a woman. Satan, disguised as a bird, appears to David when he is walking on his palace roof. David shoots an arrow at the bird, breaking a screen behind which Bathsheba is bathing thereby revealing her presence. David spies her, succumbs to temptation and fails the test. Some of the rabbis argued that David could have avoided sin, but chose not to, to avoid appearing to triumph over God.⁶⁸

⁵⁸ For a review of the way the Penitential Psalms were presented visually, see Costley (2004).

⁵⁹ Psalm 51, preface. Psalm 50 in Jewish editions.

⁶⁰ See Freedman (1993).

⁶¹ Reif and Reif (2002), p 50.

⁶² Josephus (2006). chapter 7.

⁶³ Josephus (2006). chapter 7:3.

⁶⁴ Josephus (2006). chapter 7:3.

⁶⁵ Epstein et al (1938). Following references to Talmud provide folio and number.

⁶⁶ ‘Abodah Zarah folio 5a

⁶⁷ Sanhedrin folio 107a

⁶⁸ Sanhedrin folio 107a

One legend sees Bathsheba being pre-destined to be David's wife from the time of creation. His mistake was to enjoy her before she is 'ripe', before the due time. The error is one of timing, or lack of patience.⁶⁹ Another legend looks forward to David's reputation amongst his descendants. He asks if his sin with Bathsheba can be hidden so that scholars of subsequent generations – or in another version, schoolchildren – will not gossip about the affair. He is told that this is no more possible than it is to walk upon hot coals without getting burned feet.⁷⁰ Another story about reputation is told of David being pestered by critics asking him if he knows the penalty for adultery. He responds that it is less severe than that for malicious gossip.⁷¹

While the general theme of these stories is that David does indeed sin, even if it is for a worthy purpose (not shaming God, learning repentance), there is one section of the Talmud that appears to exonerate David.⁷² Adultery was not involved, it is suggested – warriors file a bill of divorce when going to battle to allow their wives to re-marry on their death. Nor is Uriah unjustly killed – he refuses an order from his king to visit his wife, and he refers to his commander as 'my Lord'. At most David commits a technical error in getting Uriah killed in battle rather than after due process of law, using the Sanhedrin to pass judgement. However the writer distances himself from these claims by saying that 'Rab observed: Rabbi, who is descended from David seeks to defend him', and after the excuses, the phrase 'save in the matter of Uriah the Hittite' is quoted, following the wording of the Book of Kings. So even if the section of the Talmud where David seems to get off most lightly, doubt is cast on any claims to clear him.

The key role of the Talmudic David is as a penitent and psalmist, not a king or even a religious leader. To be a model penitent who could pour his heart into poetry it helped if he had been an exemplary sinner as well. As one Jewish commentator explains wryly 'the more David's sins are enlarged in our rabbinical texts, the more he becomes a model of repentance.'⁷³

The Islamic Tradition

The Islamic versions of the story provide some continuities with Jewish interpretations, reflecting both conversion to the new faith and access to written and oral sources, but there are some innovative features.⁷⁴ The Qur'an classifies 25 major figures as 'prophets', including David. Luke and Josephus had both designated him, in passing, as a prophet in the sense he could predict the future.⁷⁵ A 'Prophet' for Islam was different: it is someone who brings sacred texts, warnings or good news, but for some Islamic scholars it also had a good character, or 'no major sins' qualification.⁷⁶ So David qualified as a 'prophet' based on his

⁶⁹ Sanhedrin folio 107a

⁷⁰ Sanhedrin folio 107a

⁷¹ Baba Mezi'a folio 59

⁷² Shabbat folio 56a

⁷³ Miura (2007), p 113.

⁷⁴ Steenbrink (2006), p 347,352.

⁷⁵ Acts 2:30; Josephus (2006).

⁷⁶ Qur'an 2:213.

role as psalmist, leader and judge. The character test would prove more difficult. Further, given that David was now a prophet for Islam, there is no longer any need for the prophet Nathan.⁷⁷ But David is more than a prophet; he is a 'messenger', someone responsible for sacred texts. Whereas Moses brought the Torah, and Mohammed the Qur'an, David's special literary gift to the world was the Psalms.⁷⁸

The Qur'anic story about David is told not as a special revelation but a widely known story.⁷⁹ A rich and poor man argue over their sheep, and come to David to seek a resolution of the conflict. They disturb his prayer – drawing attention to his piety. They are offered advice about the importance of dealing fairly with others, and honesty in business transactions. David, unlike his out-witted counterpart in the original version, is smart and quickly works out it is really his behaviour that is in question. So he repents and is forgiven. His sins are not recounted to the audience, nor is Bathsheba's name mentioned; they already know the story. They are reminded that David repents and is forgiven, but the real lesson, the Qur'an recounts, is about fairness – is it fair that a rich man should seize the assets of a poor man? As in the original story, David has been richly endowed already; the sin is to covet more than this and to take what has not been assigned to him. Mohammed improves the story rhetorically – the rich man had a large number of sheep – this one has 99. He wants the extra one to round out his flock to 100. So the way the Qur'an tells the story, the key lesson is about social responsibilities of the powerful. There is no reference to punishment. Once David repents, he is forgiven. He is then reminded that as a judge he needs to judge fairly, but also – perhaps following Josephus's exhortation - urged not to get led astray by his desires.

In the Qur'an story, David is described as God's 'servant' and a 'penitent'. The phrase 'my servant David' picks up a term familiar to Jewish readers from their scriptures.⁸⁰ Calling David a 'penitent' provides a link to the Psalms and the later rabbinical tradition. The story comes from the Prophet's Medina period, when one of the key audiences he was seeking to win over to the new faith were Jewish. Providing a positive spin on the colourful story that they all knew was a sensible pragmatic approach. Nor was there a need for another story about punishment; the body of speeches and sayings that became the Qur'an already had seven major punishment stories, developed during Mohammed's earlier Mecca period.⁸¹ In these stories a messenger warns the people (usually to desist from something), most ignore the warning, the few who listen are rescued, while the remainder are destroyed.⁸² The story of David's misbehaviour does not fit into this narrative frame because it is one man who sins, not a multitude, and the sinner is rescued while the innocent suffer. The audience also changes the content of the message: in Mecca the stories warn pagans of the perils of ignoring the messenger, in Medina they provide continuity between the Jewish tradition and

⁷⁷ However Samuel, while not named is referred to indirectly as the 'prophet' the people of Israel came to asking for a king, to serve as military leader (Qur'an, 2:246).

⁷⁸ Qur'an 17:55.

⁷⁹ Qur'an, 38:21-25; Steenbrink (2006).

⁸⁰ See for example 1 Kings 11:32 and Ezekiel 37:24

⁸¹ Welch (2000), p 77-116.

⁸² Some Islamic scholars argue that these stories are primarily about redemption rather than punishment. See Haleem (2006).

the new revelation.⁸³ Subsequent Muslim legends about David also drew on Jewish sources.⁸⁴ David asks God to put him to the test so he can join the ranks of the patriarchs. The devil in the form of a bird attracts his attention towards Bathsheba.⁸⁵ David in this version is more restrained; he limits himself to enquiring who the woman is, and only sends for her after her husband has died. Another version of the testing story has David seeing if he can go for one complete day without sin.⁸⁶

In some of the versions of the story, the death of Uriah is dragged out to great rhetorical effect, not unlike the use Italian communists made of Trastulli's death.⁸⁷ Uriah is put in the front line to ensure he is killed, but he is such a good soldier he wins a great victory over the enemy, single-handedly. The same thing happens a second time. It is only the third time that David's plot to have him killed succeeds. David's period of repentance is extended, in line with the Jewish sources, crying for 40 days until his tears make the desert bloom with grass.⁸⁸ One novel feature of the Muslim sources is the imagined confrontation with Uriah on the Day of Judgement, with several stories exploring this encounter. Uriah is described as wandering around with his head in his hands and blood gushing out his neck.⁸⁹ Uriah retains the right to forgive David.

While David might be a murderer, in the Islamic versions of the story, he is not an adulterer. Anyone who said otherwise is threatened with flogging.⁹⁰ Why the guardians of Islamic storytelling orthodoxy decided that murder is acceptable but adultery is not, is not obvious. Neither sin is directly mentioned in the Qur'an in reference to David so it is open to early Muslims to read either sin back into the story. The sin of the census is also included in the stories, even if from a Muslim perspective counting potential soldiers is hardly a crime.⁹¹ Like Rabbi, as reported sceptically by Rab in the Talmud, some Islamic scholars argued that David was without major sin, using the same excuses - soldiers divorced their wives when they go to war and Uriah disobeyed lawful authority.⁹² Some of the Muslim authorities suggested that the offence may be of a technical nature - for Jews this was typically killing Uriah without being judged by a court, for Muslims this involved not listening to both sides of the story (only the poor man's version). Two other minor sins some other Muslim authors find in David include: the sin of avarice and taking a second peek at the naked Bathsheba.⁹³ However the overall picture of David developed by Islam shows him as a virtuous man who abused his position of power, but quickly repented and drew valuable lessons from the experience.

⁸³ Marshall (1999), p 26.

⁸⁴ 'According to the people of the book', see Déclais (1999), p 195.

⁸⁵ Al-Tabari's text is provided in Brinner (1991), p 44.

⁸⁶ Brinner (1991), p 146.

⁸⁷ Brinner (1991), p 145, 148-149.

⁸⁸ Brinner (1991), p 149.

⁸⁹ Brinner (1991), p 146.

⁹⁰ Baydawi's Arabic commentary is translated into French in Déclais (1999), p 202. Translation into English by author.

⁹¹ Brinner (1991), p 150.

⁹² Brinner (1991), p 203.

⁹³ Déclais (1999), p 197,199.

The Christian Tradition

Christians make more extensive use of the story than the other two faith traditions. Bathsheba is one of only four women from the Hebrew Bible also identified in the Christian Bible, all of whom may have been associated with sexual irregularities or pregnancies outside marriage, and may have been Gentiles.⁹⁴ This potentially establishes three things: the lineage of Jesus within the House of David, the possibility of a wider market for the new religion than simply Jews, and historical sanction for irregular births.

Bathsheba also received good coverage – or rather uncoverage – in many popular prayer books and Bibles from medieval times. It is one of the few opportunities dutiful Christians could combine piety and voyeurism, something that Erasmus complained about; as he commented: ‘when it comes to the depiction of females how much naughtiness is there admixed by the artists’.⁹⁵ Unlike the other two faiths that relied almost exclusively on words or music, Christianity made extensive use of images to inspire and educate followers. One popular image depicted Bathsheba bathing while David watches; she sometimes appeared with an apple, establishing her link with Eve.

A study of carnal pleasures may also provide insights into the history of salvation. For Ambrose, Bathsheba represented the flesh, symbolizing the human nature of Jesus. So David’s sins of the flesh prefigured what Christians refer to as the Incarnation.⁹⁶ Thus ‘adultery took place as a kind of salvation’. Ambrose continued, spelling out the link between adultery and salvation:

And so the bride runs around looking for God's Word, for the wretched flesh, wounded and naked, adulterous in all things yet immaculate in Christ, looks for her Redeemer.⁹⁷

Another allegorical interpretation drew on the Jewish legend that Bathsheba was pre-destined for David.⁹⁸ David, according to Augustine, was the Messiah, with Bathsheba the Church who was promised to the Messiah from the creation, and Uriah the devil who had to be eliminated to allow the promised union to take place.⁹⁹ Eucherius provided a more sinister version: David was the Messiah, Bathsheba the Law (which must be overcome) and Uriah the Jewish people (who must be destroyed).¹⁰⁰

Following his repentance David was forgiven through divine grace (foreshadowing the forgiveness offered to all in the new religion).¹⁰¹ As Irenaeus puts it, no-one can be justified

⁹⁴ These possible connections are reviewed by Smit (2010).

⁹⁵ Costley (2004), p 1264.

⁹⁶ Bonfil et al (2011), p 981.

⁹⁷ The text attributed to Ambrose is at: de Milan (1977), p 78-81; The English translation provided here is from Von Balthasar (1991), p 39.

⁹⁸ Jeffrey (1992), p 184; De Lange (1970).

⁹⁹ Augustine (c 400). 22:87.

¹⁰⁰ The text attributed to Eucherius is at: Eucherius (430). Book 2, p 1090; Summarised in: Jeffrey (1992), p 183.

¹⁰¹ Goodblatt (2009), p 34.

by their own actions - David's repentance was not enough - it is only through the new dispensation brought by Christianity that forgiveness is possible. But there are no special favours for kings, David was subject to the same rules as everyone else.¹⁰²

The story of David and Bathsheba therefore, according to the Church Fathers, foreshadows the coming of the Messiah and forgiveness offered through him, and posits Christianity as a replacement for Judaism.

Alongside the allegorical understandings of the text are more direct interpretations. Augustine says that while the 'literal David' was forgiven he did not avoid a 'temporal chastisement'.¹⁰³ Christians are warned not to regard David's behaviour as something to emulate. But if they did, new practices of regular confession offered forgiveness through the church.¹⁰⁴ Medieval preachers regularly told their congregations that if David could be forgiven, so could they.¹⁰⁵ John Donne, in a sermon on Psalm 51, like several other male commentators on the story, suggested that Bathsheba had to take her share of responsibility:

That though she did not bathe with a purpose to be scene [sic], yet she did not enough to provide against the infirmity of others.¹⁰⁶

In his interpretation of Psalm 51 Calvin followed the Church Fathers by arguing that divine grace is required for forgiveness. Any apparent tolerance of the king's behaviour by his subjects is to be discounted. David has to answer only to God, not because he has not injured others but 'in order to prevent his mind from being soothed into a false peace by the flatteries of his court'.¹⁰⁷ There is no special dispensation for royal misbehaviour. David's punishment, according to Calvin, includes the rape of his daughter Tamar. It is a sign of his 'domestic negligence', using language similar to that used in the case against the Earl of Castlehaven almost a century later, a reminder of the dangers of abandoning 'the disciplined way of life'.¹⁰⁸ The devil also has a part to play: as Calvin puts it, it is possible to see 'how subtle the devil is, for in the end David let his daughter be corrupted'.¹⁰⁹

Yet another exposition on Psalm 51 comes from someone not known for his theology – Machiavelli – in the form of a sermon to the Company of Charity, a Florentine confraternity dedicated to penitence and self-flagellation.¹¹⁰ In Machiavelli's sermon, David deeply regretted his behaviour, weeping bitterly – this repentance was enough, in Machiavelli's account, to win not just forgiveness but a special place in heaven. There is no reference to the Church providing absolution, foreshadowing a view later espoused by Protestants.¹¹¹

¹⁰² Iranaeus (2004). Book 4, Chapter 27.

¹⁰³ Augustine (c 400). 22:67

¹⁰⁴ Baldwin (1998), p 191-210.

¹⁰⁵ Jeffrey (1992), p 183.

¹⁰⁶ Goodblatt (2009), p 28.

¹⁰⁷ Calvin (1949), p 286.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin (1992), p 618.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin (1992), p 617.

¹¹⁰ The sermon itself is in Sumberg (1993), p 47.

¹¹¹ Ciliotta-Rubery (1997), p 11-44; For the Florentine historical context see Colish (1999).

However Machiavelli's understanding of repentance is more consistent with Jewish interpretations than those of the Reformers: David's repentance was itself enough to achieve forgiveness. However it is difficult for individuals to give up bad habits, so he argues for reducing opportunities for sinful behaviour. Like most other commentators, Machiavelli kept Nathan out of the story and ignored the wider consequences that follow from David's actions. In the Penitential Psalms that are the staple of the confraternity, repentance was the focus of interest, so other issues were sidelined.

Machiavelli's sermon gained a new lease of life a century later when French writer Machon used it in a tract commissioned by Richelieu, completed in 1643. Machon adapted Machiavelli's discussion of David and Bathsheba to defend absolute monarchy.¹¹² Royal prerogatives, in this interpretation, include a special license for the king to use deception or violence to promote the greater good of their kingdom. This is a special 'mystery of state',¹¹³ which is judged by different rules. The affair with Bathsheba and assassination of Uriah, while as personal behaviour might be justifiably criticised, as an act of state can be justified because it led to the dynasty resulting in the Messiah.¹¹⁴ In Augustine's allegory David's behaviour represented a mystery of divine providence, in the hands of an apologist for an absolutist monarchy it became a mystery of royal authority.

At about the same time as Machon's tract appeared, Hobbes used the David and Bathsheba story for a similar purpose – to justify a special status for the behaviour of the monarch.¹¹⁵ Hobbes went further, asserting that the actions of the king could not be challenged.

For it has been already shown that nothing the sovereign representative can do to a subject, on what pretence soever, can properly be called injustice or injury.¹¹⁶

Even putting to death an innocent person was within the royal prerogative, and the victim had no right to seek redress. However, and this is where Hobbes makes his original contribution to the story, the power to act in a way that would be seen as evil when done by anyone less than the king was given to the monarch by the subjects themselves – such as Uriah.

For though the action be against the law of nature, as being contrary to equity (as was the killing of Uriah by David); yet it was not an injury to Uriah, but to God. Not to Uriah, because the right to do what he pleased was given him by Uriah himself; and yet to God, because David was God's subject and prohibited all iniquity by the law of nature.¹¹⁷

So the king is accountable for his behaviour only to God, not to Uriah as in some of the Islamic stories, let alone the Parliamentarians who were debating whether to order the execution of Charles I. Like Machiavelli, Hobbes kept Nathan out of the story. But whereas

¹¹² The text of Machon's apology is at: Machon (1643).

¹¹³ Butler (1940).

¹¹⁴ Donaldson (1992), p 220.

¹¹⁵ Schrock (1992), p 60.

¹¹⁶ Hobbes (2010). Chapter 21, paragraph 7.

¹¹⁷ Hobbes (2010). Chapter 21, paragraph 7.

Machiavelli seemed to be challenging authority, in his case that of the Church, both Machon (in his interpretation of Machiavelli) and Hobbes used the story to bolster the authority of the king.

Conclusions: the art of scandal management

The original story is a powerful scandal that speaks with a ‘dangerous voice’.¹¹⁸ David neglected his royal duties, cheated on a loyal officer, tried to cover up his crime by murdering the cuckolded husband, and then fell for a trick by Nathan that led to David condemning himself. His failings were exposed for all to see as his family disintegrated.

So what happened to the story afterwards in the hands of storytellers from the three traditions? This can be examined in terms of the strategies of rationalisation identified in the introduction: denying that a crime has taken place, disputing responsibility for the crime, playing down the harm to the victim, blaming the victim, and finding a greater good that justifies any harm done to the victim.

Strategies of rationalisation

None of the traditions, at least in their official expositions of the story, denied that David committed serious offences. The Talmud played with the idea that David was sinless, but rejected the idea. The Qur’an did not itemize the crimes, but it reported David recognised his failings and repented. Later Islamic scholars convicted him of the murder of Uriah, as well as the crime of the census, though not of adultery. Christian theologians meanwhile generally acknowledged the adultery and murder, as they allegorised them away into events in the history of salvation.

In general David was held responsible. There were some marginal musings in Christian sources that suggested Bathsheba should have taken better precautions not to be seen, a claim illustrated by the provocative nudity of Bathsheba in some prayer books and bibles, but the consensus was that David was primarily to blame for the crimes. Jewish legends, picked up by Islam, discharged Bathsheba from any suspicion by introducing the devil to share the blame – Bathsheba was bathing behind a screen, which was pierced by David’s arrow shot at the devil in the form of a bird. Early Christian allegories found secondary meanings in the story, but without reducing David’s guilt.

Uriah, the male murder victim, was generally acknowledged, and in some of the Islamic legends was given a special status, with a more glorious death and a voice in David’s punishment. Within a patriarchal framework, rape victims however were largely overlooked. Bathsheba became more a symbol than a person – she could be part of an eternal plan, in which she was promised to David from the time of Creation (some Jewish versions), or she was a critical link in the chain to the birth of the Messiah (an official Christian version). Largely forgotten was Tamar, raped by Amnon, and the concubines of David, taken by

¹¹⁸ Brueggemann (1990), p 241.

Absalom. By turning the incident into a masculine contest between David and God, with the victims incidental to the main game, some Jewish and Muslim legends can be seen as turning the victims into mere pawns in a male jousting ritual.

The spotlight shifted to the accusers by some rabbinical scholars reported in the Talmud. When David is asked the penalty for adultery, the answer given was that the penalty for slander is far worse, implying that those who accused David should themselves be reproached. This implies that David's reputation was more important than the fate of the victims. Apart from this there was no obvious attempt to discredit David's accusers. At any rate, in several of the Jewish and Islamic legends, David dealt directly with God, so there were no other accusers.

In the Christian allegories, a greater good emerges – adultery was linked to salvation, the death of Uriah allowed Christ to be united with his Church, and the sins of the flesh foreshadowed the human life of the Messiah. In the Jewish stories, David became the model penitent and the Psalms a universal textbook of repentance. There was a silver lining.

So the overall balance sheet is mixed. The crimes were acknowledged, David was held responsible and no real attempt was made to discredit the accusers. But only the male victim was recognized, the female victims were generally ignored. David's reputation took priority over outcomes for victims, and a variety of 'greater goods' were found to emerge from the situation. So from the analysis so far, it could reasonably be concluded that each tradition had elements of 'roguish' and 'redemptive' behaviour. Such a conclusion however misses some key silences in the text, to use Passerini's language, two key elements that have been largely removed. These include the voice of Nathan and the institution of kingship.

The challenge of accountability

Most of the stories airbrush out of the account the one person who held David accountable – Nathan. In the original version it is Nathan who confronts David with his actions, and announces the sanctions that will follow. Nathan does not approach David as a subject; he comes in an institutional role that authorises him to chastise the king, to announce the punishment that will follow, declare forgiveness of a sort – and walk away without being threatened. It is more than speaking truth to power; Nathan is in effect an alternative source of power, as he shows when he conspires with Bathsheba to arrange the succession to David.

Calvin alluded to the issue of accountability when he warns rulers not to be swayed by the tolerance of their behaviour by their followers. However in the original story the opposite was the situation – David's behaviour was roundly condemned, and the public would have participated in this vicariously as they watched the scandal unfold. Whether Nathan is taken to represent divine judgement or popular discontent, his presence in the story marks a check on royal power not a sign that rulers can get away with anything.

In the Jewish fables picked by Islam, David negotiates directly with God, who puts him to the test and accepts David's repentance. There is no need for an intermediary. In the Church

Fathers' allegorical triangles (David-Bathsheba-Uriah) there is no place for a fourth participant. In the Qur'an the narrative frame permits only one prophet, and David already has that role. Hobbes was chastised by a modern commentator for writing Nathan out of the story; however Hobbes was merely complying with a long-established convention in the reception history of the story.¹¹⁹ Josephus keeps Nathan in his story, so the exclusion of Nathan in other accounts is likely to reflect choice rather than ignorance. The major effect of taking Nathan out of the story is to remove a major check on arbitrary exercise of power. Nathan represents both a second power base and an alternative view of morality to that represented by the monarch.

David's status as king was generally played down in the commentaries from the three traditions. David's sins were interpreted as personal failings rather than a breach of royal duties, let alone a result of institutional failure. In the story told in the Book of Samuel however, kingship is central. In the season when (responsible) kings go off to war, David remains at home. Home is a palace. It is with royal authority that he gets messengers to bring Bathsheba to him. It is as king he summons Uriah back from the front and dispatches him to his death. Yet in the Jewish legends that were later taken up by Islam, kingship largely disappeared. God and David play what appears to be a male game about bragging rights, with David set a challenge using women as the bait. In the 'literal' Christian interpretations, David represents Everyman, a normal hot-blooded male who is dominated by his passions. Minimizing kingship may partly reflect evolving historical realities: under the thumb of foreign rulers, Jews would have been in trouble if they spoke too loudly about reviving a monarchy, while Christians had a similar imperative to avoid direct confrontations with established authority.

One might query whether the Qur'an is a touch prudish, if a lustful king drooling over a naked woman, as presented in medieval prayer books, is the model of what the story is 'really' about. However what if the absence of steamy sex is not an omission at all, but the Qur'anic version captures the essence of the story? What if the real crime was not individual misbehaviour, but an affair of state, a crime of the powerful? In the Qur'an, David takes a poor man's sheep to make his flock up to 100. He takes, he enriches himself, he undermines the livelihood of a powerless subject. This is consistent with what Nathan says in the story reported in the Book of Samuel – as king David had been given many blessings including women, with the implication that if he wanted more he had only to ask. The sin is thus one of 'taking', just as Adam took the fruit he was not entitled to. This however is not ordinary theft, the seizure is undertaken with royal authority.¹²⁰ The royal avarice violates the sacred mandate that has been given David as king. Nor are the punishments personal to David as an individual, they are judgments on the House of David, so for example in the descriptions of Tamar and Amnon, 'David is repeatedly, even redundantly, presented as king'.¹²¹ If this interpretation is correct, the sin of the census falls into place as part of a pattern – it too involves failing to be satisfied with the blessings that have already been given. Taking a

¹¹⁹ Schrock (1992), p 69.

¹²⁰ Janzen (2012), p 220.

¹²¹ Gunn and Fewell (1993), p 150.

census is even more overtly an act of state power, both in documenting populations and horses within the kingdom and signalling preparation for war. David commits these crimes not as a man, but a king.

Machon and Hobbes both saw the nature of the crime against Bathsheba and Uriah as having a sovereign dimension. They canvassed a special status for the ruler in their accounts, in their case to exempt monarchs from responsibility to their subjects. So are sovereign crimes different in character to ‘ordinary’ crimes? Hobbes and Machon seem to suggest that there is a different set of rules and procedures by which leaders, or more generally persons with a special mandate, are to be judged. Does sovereignty come with a license to misbehave – or only if this behaviour is in the interests of the nation? On the other hand, Calvin claimed that the special mandate is not a license for rulers to sin for the greater good, but a duty to ensure that the nation upholds its side of the divine covenant.

Indeed the story contains within itself – or alongside other stories in the same books of the Hebrew Bible - a refutation of the absolute power that Machon and Hobbes were so keen to promote. Two of these stories concern Nathan, and two Samuel. Nathan has the authority to denounce David’s behaviour and announce the punishment that will befall the House of David. Later, less gloriously, he indulges in the role of kingmaker, something absolute kings would not tolerate. Samuel meanwhile warns about the perils of kingship, which includes a reference to the proclivity of kings for war. On the other hand Samuel’s own sons are seen to be corrupt, perhaps evidence that power corrupts even the most virtuous families.

By reading the story of David and Bathsheba alongside the subsequent re-telling of the story by the three faith traditions, we can begin to see what they found so confronting about it. Sex and violence they could handle for the most part; betrayal and fratricide could be understood. Nakedness could be accommodated in the margins of prayer books. But stripping bare the pretensions of the king was uncomfortably subversive. It was hard enough to base a religious tradition on such a deeply flawed character. But to suggest that the flaw was in the institutional design of kingship itself represents a challenge to established authority, whether in the form of Popes, Caliphs or Emperors. Far from providing rulers with a license to misbehave, the story, in this view, represents an invitation for subjects to hold their rulers accountable.

Such a challenge to sovereignty might be seen as a scandal that, like Uriah in early Christian accounts, had to be eliminated. So Nathan had to be airbrushed out of the story in a cover-up that served to protect existing power structures. While David was for the most part held responsible for his behaviour, the sovereign character of his crime was largely forgotten. A more generous reading is that the needs of the faith communities shifted and the story with it. David was transformed into a pious writer of Psalms, a founder of a dynasty that would produce the Messiah, and a righteous Prophet in the lineage of Mohammed. A critique of sovereignty was therefore – according to this more indulgent view – simply not relevant to the emerging narrative requirements of the different traditions.

Regardless of why the story of David and Bathsheba came to be transformed into the less confronting form of a personal tragedy, it can also be read as Machiavelli, Machon and Hobbes have done, as a commentary on the nature of political power. It raises questions fundamental to the current debates about sexual abuse of vulnerable people by those endowed with religious authority and the cover-ups that attempt to conceal the abuses. In particular, what is it about the nature of authority in those institutions that make such behaviour possible and indeed 'normal' for the perpetrators? (Are kings destined to start wars?) How could leaders get away with covering-up illegal behaviour for so long? (How did David execute the plot to kill Uriah?) But then, how does abuse of power come unstuck? (What role does Nathan play?). Perhaps most shocking about the parable from the point of view of contemporary religious organisations is that David himself was spared punishment (at least in the form the Law required), it was his House that was ravaged, those he loved destroyed and his gift to posterity, the Temple, postponed. A sovereign crime resulted in sanctions inflicted on the kingdom. The scandal precipitated by David's unjust dealings with Bathsheba would come to undermine both the legitimacy of the ruler and the stability of the institution.

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