CHAPTER 11

And it happened at the turn of the year, at the time the kings sally forth, 1
that David sent out Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and

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Chapters 11 and 12, the story of David and Bathsheba and its immediate aftermath, are the great turning point of the whole David story, as both Sternberg and Polzin have duly observed; and it seems as though the writer has pulled out all the stops of his remarkable narrative art in order to achieve a brilliant realization of this crucially pivotal episode. The deployment of thematic key words, the shifting play of dialogue, the intricate relation between instructions and their execution, the cultivated ambiguities of motive, are orchestrated with a richness that scarcely has an equal in ancient narrative. Though the analytic scholars have variously sought to break up these chapters into editorial frame and Succession Narrative, Prophetic composition and old source, emending patches of the text as they proceed, such efforts are best passed over in silence, for the powerful literary integrity of the text speaks for itself.

1. *at the turn of the year.* The most plausible meaning is the beginning of the spring, when the end of the heavy winter rains makes military action feasible.

at the time when the kings sally forth. There is a cunning ambiguity here in the Hebrew text. The received consonantal text reads *mal'akhim,* "messengers," though many manuscripts show *melakhim,* "kings." As Polzin observes, the verb "to sally forth" (or, in nonmilitary contexts, "to go forth") is often attached to kings and never to messengers, so "kings" is definitely the more likely reading, though the ghost of "messengers" shows through in the letters of the text. Polzin beautifully describes this double take: "the verse clearly doubles back on itself in a marvelous display of narrative virtuosity: at a time when kings go forth, David did not, making it a time, therefore, when messengers must go forth; at a time when messengers go forth, David, remaining in Jerusalem, sent Joab, his servants and all Israel to ravage Ammon."

David sent out Joab. The verb "to send"—the right verb for "messengers"—occurs eleven times in this chapter, framing the beginning and the end. This episode is not a moral parable but a story anchored in the realities of political history. It is concerned with the institutionalization of the monarchy. David,

they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. And David was sitting in Jerusalem.

2 And it happened at eventide that David arose from his bed and walked about on the roof of the king's house, and he saw from
3 the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired after the woman, and the one he sent said, "Why, this is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam wife of Uriah the Hittite."

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now a sedentary king removed from the field of action and endowed with a dangerous amount of leisure, is seen constantly operating through the agency of others, sending messengers within Jerusalem and out to Ammonite territory. Working through intermediaries, as the story will abundantly show, creates a whole new order of complications and unanticipated consequences.

And David was sitting in Jerusalem. The verb for "sitting" also means "to stay" (compare verse 12), but it is best to preserve the literal sense here because of the pointed sequence: sitting, lying, rising, and because in biblical usage "to sit" is also an antonym of "to go out" (or sally forth).

2. *at eventide.* The Hebrew term, *l'et 'erev,* echoes ironically with the phrase *l'et ts'et,* "at the time of sallying forth" in the previous verse. A siesta on a hot spring day would begin not long after noon, so this recumbent king has been in bed an inordinately long time.

he saw from the roof. The palace is situated on a height, so David can look down on the naked Bathsheba bathing, presumably on her own rooftop. This situation of the palace also explains why David tells Uriah to "go down" to his house. Later in the story, archers deal destruction from the heights of the city wall, the Hebrew using the same preposition, *me'al,* to convey the sense of "from above."

3. *the one he sent said.* The Hebrew uses an unspecified "he said."

Bathsheba daughter of Eliam wife of Uriah the Hittite. It is unusual to identify a woman by both father and husband. The reason may be, as Bar-Efrat suggests, that both men are members of David's elite corps of warriors. Although Uriah's designation as Hittite has led some interpreters to think of him as a foreign mercenary, the fact that he has a pious Israelite name ("the LORD is my light") suggests that he is rather a native or at least a naturalized Israelite of Hittite extraction. In any case, there is obvious irony in the fact that the man of foreign origins is the perfect Good Soldier of Israel, whereas the Israelite king betrays and murders him.

And David sent messengers and fetched her and she came to him and 4
he lay with her, she having just cleansed herself of her impurity, and
she returned to her house. And the woman became pregnant and sent 5
and told David and said, "I am pregnant." And David sent to Joab: 6
"Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah the Hittite to David.

And Uriah came to him, and David asked how Joab fared and how the 7
troops fared and how the fighting fared. And David said to Uriah, "Go 8
down to your house and bathe your feet." And Uriah went out from the

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4. *David sent . . . and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her.* It is not uncommon for biblical narrative to use a chain of verbs in this fashion to indicate rapid, single-minded action. What is unusual is that one verb in the middle of this sequence switches grammatical subject—from David to Bathsheba. When the verb "come to" or "come into" has a masculine subject and "into" is followed by a feminine object, it designates a first act of sexual intercourse. One wonders whether the writer is boldly toying with this double meaning, intimating an element of active participation by Bathsheba in David's sexual summons. The text is otherwise entirely silent on her feelings, giving the impression that she is passive as others act on her. But her later behavior in the matter of her son's succession to the throne (1 Kings 1–2) suggests a woman who has her eye on the main chance, and it is possible that opportunism, not merely passive submission, explains her behavior here as well. In all of this, David's sending messengers first to ask about Bathsheba and then to call her to his bed means that the adultery can scarcely be a secret within the court.

cleansed herself of her impurity. The reference is to the ritually required bath after the end of menstruation. This explains Bathsheba's bathing on the roof and also makes it clear that she could not be pregnant by her husband.

5. *I am pregnant.* Astonishingly, these are the only words Bathsheba speaks in this story. In keeping with the stringent efficiency of biblical narrative, the story leaps forward from the sexual act to the discovery of pregnancy.

8. *Go down to your house and bathe your feet.* Some interpreters have made this more heavy handed than it is by construing the final phrase as a euphemism for sex (because "feet" in the Bible is occasionally a euphemism for the male genitals). But in the biblical world, bathing the feet is something travelers regularly do when they come from the dusty road. This bathing of the feet stands in a kind of synecdochic relation to Bathsheba's bathing of her whole body, discreetly suggesting that after the bathing of the feet other refreshments of the body will ensue.

9 king's house and the king's provisions came out after him. And Uriah
lay at the entrance to the king's house with all the servants of his mas-
10 ter, and he went not down to his house. And they told David, saying,
"Uriah did not go down to his house." And David said to Uriah, "Look,
you have come from a journey. Why have you not gone down to your
11 house?" And Uriah said to David, "The Ark and Israel and Judah are
sitting in huts, and my master Joab and my master's servants are
encamped in the open field, and shall I then come to my house to eat
and to drink and to lie with my wife? By your life, by your very life, I

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the king's provisions. David has not explicitly mentioned food or wine, but he sends a kind of catered dinner after Uriah, hoping that the feast with Bathsheba will get husband and wife into the desired amorous mood.

9. *And Uriah lay at the entrance of the king's house.* The verb "to lie," according to David's expectations, should have been followed by "with his wife." Instead, we have not sex but a soldier's sleeping with his comrades, who are guarding the king. It should be remembered (compare 1 Samuel:19) that soldiers in combat generally practiced sexual abstinence.

11. *sitting in huts.* Some construe *sukot,* "huts," as a place-name, the city of Succoth a little east of the Jordan. But if the Ark is sent out of Jerusalem to the front, it would make no sense to detain it at a logistics center only halfway to the battlefield, and Uriah's point is that neither the Ark nor the troops enjoy proper shelter (while David is "sitting in Jerusalem").

shall I then come to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? Uriah now spells out all that David left unsaid when he urged him to go down to his house. The crucial detail of sleeping with Bathsheba comes at the very end. Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg, in a pioneering Hebrew article in 1968 (revised by Sternberg for his English book of 1985), raised the provocative issue of deliberate ambiguity (comparing the strategy of this story with the two mutually exclusive readings possible for Henry James's short story "The Turn of the Screw"). In their view, there are two equally viable readings. If Uriah does *not* know that David has cuckolded him, he is the instrument of dramatic irony—the perfect soldier vis-à-vis the treacherous king who is desperately trying to manipulate him so that the husband will unwittingly cover the traces of his wife's sexual betrayal. If Uriah *does* know of the adultery, he is a rather different character—not naive but shrewdly aware, playing a dangerous game of hints in which he deliberately pricks the conscience of the king, cognizant, and perhaps not caring, that his own life may soon be forfeit. More

will not do this thing." And David said to Uriah, "Stay here today as 12
well, and tomorrow I shall send you off." And Uriah stayed in
Jerusalem that day and the next. And David called him, and he ate 13
before him and drank, and David made him drunk. And he went out in
the evening to lie in the place where he lay with the servants of his
master, but to his house he did not go down. And it happened in the 14
morning that David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of
Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, saying, "Put Uriah in the face of the 15
fiercest battling and draw back, so that he will be struck down and die."

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recently, Moshe Garsiel has proposed a reconciliation of these two readings: when Uriah first arrives from the front, he is unaware of what has occurred; after the first night with his comrades at the palace gate, he has been duly informed of the sexual betrayal, so that in his second dialogue with the king, he cultivates a rhetoric of implicit accusation. Garsiel observes that when Uriah swears emphatically by David's life (verse 11), he does not add the deferential "my lord the king."

13. *David called him.* The verb here has the idiomatic sense of "invite."

he ate before him. The preposition is an indication of hierarchical distance between subject and king.

David made him drunk. "David" has been added for clarity. The Hebrew says only "he made him drunk." Plying Uriah with wine is a last desperate attempt, and a rather crude one, to get him to have sex with his wife.

14. *sent it by the hand of Uriah.* The letter would be in the form of a small scroll with either a seal or threads around it. David is counting on the fact that Uriah as a loyal soldier will not dream of opening the letter. If he does not know of the adultery, he has in any case no personal motive to look at the letter. If he does know, he is accepting his fate with grim resignation, bitterly conscious that his wife has betrayed him and that the king is too powerful for him to contend with.

15. *so that he will be struck down and die.* With no possibility of making Uriah seem responsible for Bathsheba's pregnancy, David now gravely compounds the original crime of adultery by plotting to get Uriah out of the way entirely by having him killed. What follows in the story makes it clear that bloodshed, far more than adultery, is David's indelible transgression.

16 And it happened, as Joab was keeping watch on the city, that he placed
17 Uriah in the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the men of the city sallied forth and did battle with Joab, and some of the troops, some of David's servants, fell, and Uriah the Hittite also died.
18, 19 And Joab sent and told David all the details of the battle. And Joab charged the messenger, saying, "When you finish reporting all the
20 details of the battle to the king, if it should happen that the king's wrath is roused and he says to you, 'Why did you approach the city to
21 fight? Did you not know they would shoot from the wall? Who struck down Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman fling down on him an upper millstone from the wall, and he died in Thebez? Why did you approach the wall?' Then shall you say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hit-

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17. *some of the troops . . . fell, and Uriah the Hittite also died.* As Perry and Sternberg have keenly observed, one of the salient features of this story is the repeated alteration of instructions by those who carry them out. It is, indeed, a vivid demonstration of the ambiguous effecting of ends through the agency of others which is one of the great political themes of the story. The canny Joab immediately sees that David's orders are impossibly clumsy (perhaps an indication that the Machiavellian David has suddenly lost his manipulative coolness): if the men around Uriah were to draw back all at once, leaving him alone exposed, it would be entirely transparent that there was a plot to get him killed. Joab, then, coldly recognizes that in order to give David's plan some credibility, it will be necessary to send a whole contingent into a dangerous place and for many others beside Uriah to die. In this fashion, the circle of lethal consequences of David's initial act spreads wider and wider.

21. *Did not a woman fling down on him an upper millstone . . . ?* The specificity of the prospective dialogue that Joab invents for a wrathful David may at first seem surprising. The story of the ignominious death of Abimelech at the hand of a woman (Judges 9: 52–54) may have become a kind of object lesson in seige strategy for professional soldiers—when you are laying seige against a city, above all beware of coming too close to the wall. One suspects also that Joab's emphasis on a woman's dealing death to the warrior—Abimelech had asked his armor bearer to run him through so that it would *not* be said he was killed by a woman!—points back to Bathsheba as the ultimate source of this chain of disasters. (This would be Joab's soldierly judgment, not necessarily the author's.)

tite also died.' " And the messenger went and came and told David all 22
that Joab had sent him for. And the messenger said to David, "The men 23
overpowered us and sallied forth against us into the field, and then we
were upon them back to the entrance of the gate. And they shot at your 24
servants from the wall, and some of the king's servants died, and your
servant Uriah the Hittite also died." And the king said to the messen- 25
ger, "Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Let this thing not seem evil in your
eyes, for the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes

Your servant Uriah the Hittite also died. Joab obviously knows that this is the message for which David is waiting. By placing it in the anticipatory "script" that he dictates to the messenger, he is of course giving away the secret, more or less, to the messenger. Might this, too, be calculated, as an oblique dissemination of David's complicity in Uriah's death, perhaps to be used at some future point by Joab against the king? In any case, given David's track record in killing messengers who bear tidings not to his liking, Joab may want to be sure that this messenger has the means to fend off any violent reaction from the king, who would not have been expecting a report of many casualties.

23. *and then we were upon them back to the entrance of the gate.* The astute messenger offers a circumstantial account that justifies the mistake of approaching too close to the wall: the Ammonites came out after the Israelites in hot pursuit; then the Israelites, turning the tide of battle, were drawn after the fleeing Ammonites and so were tricked into coming right up to the gates of the city.

24. *and your servant Uriah the Hittite also died.* The messenger has divined the real point of Joab's instructions all too well. He realizes that what David above all wants to hear is the news of Uriah's death, and rather than risk the whole outburst, indicated by the prospective dialogue invented by Joab with the reference to the woman who killed Abimelech, the messenger hastens to conclude his report, before the king can react, by mentioning Uriah's death. Thus the narrative makes palpable the inexorable public knowledge of David's crime.

25. *the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes another.* The king responds by directing to Joab what sounds like an old soldier's cliché (on the order of "every bullet has its billet"). These vapid words of consolation to the field commander are an implicit admission that Joab's revision of David's orders was necessary: David concedes that many a good man had to die in order to cover up his murder by proxy of Uriah.

another. Battle all the more fiercely against the city and destroy it.' And so rouse his spirits."

26 And Uriah's wife heard that Uriah her man was dead, and she keened
27 over her husband. And when the mourning was over, David sent and gathered her into his house and she became his wife. And she bore him a son, and the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD.

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battle all the more fiercely. The Hebrew is literally "make fierce [or, strengthen] your battle." The phrase is an emphatic formal echo of "the fiercest battling" in verse 15.

and so rouse his spirits. Literally, "and strengthen him," that is, Joab. Some read this as part of the message to Joab, construing it as "strengthen it [i.e., the battle]," though the verb has a masculine pronominal object and the word for battle is feminine.

27. *when the mourning was over.* Normally, the mourning period would be seven days. Bathsheba, then, is even more precipitous than Gertrude after the death of Hamlet the elder in hastening to the bed of a new husband. She does, of course, want to become David's wife before her big belly shows.

David sent and gathered her into his house and she became his wife. Throughout this story, David is never seen anywhere but in his house. This sentence at the end strongly echoes verse 4: "David sent . . . and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her."

the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD. Only now, after the adultery, the murder, the remarriage, and the birth of the son, does the narrator make an explicit moral judgment of David's actions. The invocation of God's judgment is the introduction to the appearance of Nathan the prophet, delivering first a moral parable "wherein to catch the conscience of the king" and then God's grim curse on David and his house.