

## IS BATHSHEBA GUILTY? THE SEPTUAGINT'S PERSPECTIVE

R.H. VAN DER BERGH

### ABSTRACT

Much has been said about Bathsheba's guilt in 2 Samuel 11. The text's ambiguity has led to quite a number of different interpretations. One of the earliest of these various voices is the Septuagint text. Being a translation, the Septuagint is inevitably also an interpretation. In this article, a closer look will be taken at the perspective of the Septuagint's translator. By comparing the Hebrew text with that of the Septuagint, taking into account the nature of the translation, slight clues to the translator's perspective emerges. This sheds some light on the way in which ancient readers appraised the role Bathsheba played in the drama contained in 2 Samuel 11.

### INTRODUCTION

To assess Bathsheba's<sup>1</sup> role in 2 Samuel 11 is no easy task. Commentators vary greatly with regard to the part she plays. This ranges from Bathsheba being a *femme fatale* who deliberately plots to become David's wife to her being an innocent victim, completely unaware of David's voyeuristic gaze (Klein 2000:48; Vom Orde 2002:143). Questioning Bathsheba's motives is not a modern development. At least as early as Josephus – who does take Bathsheba as guilty – one can discern interest in whether Bathsheba was guilty or not (Caspi & Cohen 1999:55). The question still baffles present-day interpreters of the story, as can be seen in the many renderings of the story into different mediums,<sup>2</sup> each assessing Bathsheba's guilt in other ways and on other grounds.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bathsheba is known in the Septuagint as "Bersabee." However, there can be no doubt that this is one and the same person. Throughout this paper, the more conventional "Bathsheba" will be used in order to avoid confusion.

<sup>2</sup> This has prompted some very interesting studies of depictions of Bathsheba in these different mediums. Exum (1996:*passim*), for instance, takes a look at the perspective of

This is, of course, not always expressed directly, but most interpreters' feelings toward the matter are betrayed implicitly. An example would be Francine Rivers, a present-day writer, whose 2003 publication *A lineage of grace* takes a sympathetic stance towards both Bathsheba and David. At the beginning of the story, a very young Bathsheba declares openly that she wants to marry King David (Rivers 2003:329). Further along, at the crucial bathing scene, Bathsheba deliberately, albeit timidly, continues bathing even though she is aware of David's gaze (Rivers 2003:355-356). As Exum (1996:51) notes, this implicit assessment of Bathsheba's guilt is true of most biblical scholars as well.

The real problem is, of course, that we are never privy to Bathsheba's inner thoughts or motivations (Anderson 1989:155; Garsiel 1993:261-262; McCarter 1984:289; Yee 1988:244). In fact, the whole narrative is ambiguous (Campbell 2005:113; Kim & Nyengele 2003:115). This inevitably leads to gaps being filled by our imagination (Sternberg 1985:186), and readers' imaginations have indeed "come up with many versions of this story over the years" (Frymer-Kensky 2002:146). This has led to some interesting angles on the text – such as the "polyvalent characterizations" of Bathsheba made by Alice Bach (1997:134). Special note should be taken of feminist scholars such as Bach who take particular interest in this story and Bathsheba's role therein. As Klein (2000:47) points out, Bathsheba has, until recently, been viewed by interpreters "almost exclusively through the lens of male perception". Other feminist scholars, for instance Exum (1996:52), have reacted in shock not only to the ancient, patriarchal version itself, but also to present-day interpretations of the story.

Amongst these voices, one also finds the Septuagint. The text of the

---

two films and some modern paintings of the story, as well as the biblical text. Bach (1997:132-165) also analyzes these films and other mediums. Müllner (1998:*passim*) gives an interesting perspective on twentieth century novels with David and Bathsheba as protagonists.

Septuagint is a translation – and in a way, translations are always interpretations of a specific text. The act of reading is, in itself, interpretation. The Septuagint is, of course, in many cases a literal translation of the Hebrew *Vorlage*, conforming to the Hebrew word for word (Olofsson 1990:6). In fact, at some points in the text the translation has almost become unintelligible on account of the literal translation technique used by the translator (Orlinsky 1975:104). This tendency is also true of 2 Samuel 11:2-1 Kings 2:11 (Wevers 1953:30). Indeed, in these chapters, the Septuagint is often “mechanically literalistic” (Wevers 1953:34). This is also the case with 2 Samuel 11:2-5, where the adultery of David and Bathsheba is portrayed. Nevertheless, no two languages can be exactly the same. As Tov (1986:34) states, “the nature of the Greek language ... requires certain deviations from Hebrew syntax”. If we listen closely, we might be able to learn something of the way in which the translator of the Septuagint assessed Bathsheba’s guilt. This will be the aim of this article – to investigate Bathsheba’s guilt according to the translator of the Septuagint.

This article will make use of both literary criticism and textual criticism. The task at hand can hardly be done without making use of both these methodologies.<sup>3</sup> The main focus will be on literary criticism and translation technique, with reference to textual criticism where so-ever this will influence translation. The discussion will proceed according to the salient points in the narrative pertaining to Bathsheba’s guilt.

## **THE SEPTUAGINT’S PERSPECTIVE**

### **BATHSHEBA BATHING**

The most natural place to start in an analysis of the Septuagint’s perspective on

---

<sup>3</sup> In Barthélemy, Gooding, Lust and Tov’s cooperative research on 1 Samuel 17 and 18 in *The story of David and Goliath*, Lust (1986:87) makes out a good argument for the joint use of both these methodologies.

Bathsheba would probably be the bathing scene. It is this act, together with David's stroll on the palace roof, that seems to be "der Stein, der die Lawine der darauffolgenden Ereignisse ins Rollen bringt"<sup>4</sup> (Müllner 1998:353). Hammond (1992:68) points to the importance of the translation of this event in modern English translations. The translation "washing" would evoke quite different emotions and connotations than the word "bathing". Hammond points to the fact that "washing herself" can be seen as more intimate than the simple act of "bathing." Similarly, when confronted by the Hebrew verb רָחַץ, the translator of the Septuagint had more than one choice of Greek words. This includes πλύνω, νίπτω (a later form of νίζω) and λούομαι. According to Liddell and Scott (1889:533), νίπτω is "commonly said of persons *washing part* of the person, while λούομαι is used of *bathing*, πλύνω of washing clothes". This holds true for the text of the Septuagint as well.<sup>5</sup> Kunz (2004:157) also takes the verb to be quite natural, as it entails washing the complete body with water. The choice of λούομαι, therefore, is not surprising. What is interesting, however, is that the verb is rendered in the middle voice.<sup>6</sup> This makes the verb reflexive. Bathsheba is washing *herself*. Although the Greek does not really allow for the active (λούω would mean to wash someone else's body), it has the effect of focusing more intensely on Bathsheba's body. Furthermore, the Greek is able to express more definitely, by using a present form, that the action of David's gaze and Bathsheba's bathing is happening concurrently. However, this is at most an interesting anomaly of the translation into Greek. It does not necessarily mean that Bathsheba allowed herself to be seen. Other than the normal causal

---

<sup>4</sup> The stone that effects a snowball effect of the subsequent occurrences.

<sup>5</sup> A good place of reference is Leviticus, where λούομαι and πλύνω occur frequently. Νίπτω does not occur as frequently, but cf. Exodus 38:27, where the Septuagint uses it explicitly against the Masoretic text in this way. Also take note of 2 Samuel 11:8, where νίπτω is used in the request given by David to Uriah to go "wash his feet".

<sup>6</sup> The form of the verb can be passive as well. However, in this context, it makes better sense that Bathsheba was washing *herself* than being washed!

connection effected by juxtaposition (Exum 1996:67) – which is also present in the Masoretic text – no conclusions about the translator’s perception of Bathsheba can be drawn from the bathing scene in the Septuagint. Indeed, the translation of this scene does not add to the evaluation of Bathsheba’s guilt, or at least, one cannot accuse the translator of blaming her.

Another point of interest in the Masoretic text is pointed out by Kunz (2004:157-160). He shows convincingly that bathing was seen as an action to be done by a woman before having sexual relations. According to him, the Masoretic text points to this use of  $\text{רָחַץ}$ , especially since the same verb occurs in David’s direct speech requesting Uriah to “go wash his feet.” This aspect is lost in the Septuagint as  $\text{רָחַץ}$  has been translated with  $\text{ῥίπτω}$  in verse 8. Since the translator could certainly have found a way around this problem, it would appear that he did not share the same insight as Kunz.

### BATHSHEBA’S COMING AND GOING

It is necessary to ask whether Bathsheba was passive or not. Did she willingly and knowingly go to the palace? Bailey (1990:88) is of the opinion that she did. According to him, the absence of *hiph’il* verbal forms in verse 4 of the Masoretic text indicates that she was an active participant in the movement to and from the palace.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Exum (1996:49) shows, the “two verbs of which Bathsheba is the subject, are not what one would expect if resistance were involved”. This is where the field of textual criticism comes into play. In the Septuagint tradition, some important manuscripts read  $\text{εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς αὐτήν}$  instead of the expected  $\text{εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς αὐτόν}$  which would be the direct translation of the Masoretic text. These manuscripts include Codex Vaticanus,

<sup>7</sup> *Hiph’il* verb forms would indicate that she was forced to go. Although Bailey (1990:88) comes to the conclusion that this indicates Bathsheba as a knowing accomplice to the transgression, this is not necessarily so. Garsiel (1993:256) and Exum (1996:49) point to the fact that although she goes willingly to the palace, this does not *per se* mean that she knew why she has been called.

Codex Alexandrinus and manuscripts of the Lucianic recension (Rahlfs 1935:584). Although the reading closer to the Masoretic text is found in the recension of Origen and judged by Rahlfs to be original, the variant not in accord with the Masoretic text deserves a closer look. Πρὸς αὐτήν would definitely be the more difficult reading. One would be hard pressed to explain why, after the messengers had “taken” Bathsheba, David would go to her. Furthermore, the verse ends with a return εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς. As it is a woman’s house, there can be no doubt that Bathsheba is the subject in the case of the verb ἀπέστρεψεν. Since Bathsheba is the one that has to return to her house, it must be she who moved, not David. Nevertheless, many manuscripts accepted the reading that David “went to Bathsheba.” This would mean that even if the translator thought of Bathsheba as an active participant, a great part of the copyists and readers of the Septuagint saw Bathsheba as being passive – David being the one who goes to her.

Kunz (2004:153-154) believes, on textual grounds, that Bathsheba is an active participant in the story. According to him (2004:154), הָרַשׁ with the preposition לְ in verse 3, in conjunction with the verb הָלַץ, points to active communication between Bathsheba and David. Thus, according to Kunz, David and Bathsheba plotted the affair together. He further tries to show Bathsheba’s active role by noting the parallel structure of the verbs הָלַץ - וַיִּדְרֹשׁ - וַיִּאמֶר in verse 3 and הִתְשַׁלַּח - וַתִּגַּד - וַתִּאמֶר in verse 5. This viewpoint is not quite convincing,<sup>8</sup> and it is definitely not the case with the Septuagint text. The verbal forms in the Septuagint text are ἀπέστειλεν – ἐζήτησεν – εἶπεν in verse 3 and ἀποστείλασα – ἀπήγγειλεν – εἶπεν in verse 5. Ζητέω can hardly be taken as “having deliberations with someone”. Its natural meaning in this

---

<sup>8</sup> Chronologically, this does not make sense. Kunz (2004:153) is of the opinion that it is David himself asking a rhetorical question in verse 3: “Isn’t she Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Urijah the Hittite?” Why would David ask such a question if he had already consulted with Bathsheba?

context would be “to inquire about”. Although the feminine participle ἀποστείλασα may point to the translator’s wish to preserve the Hebrew verb’s gender, the change from indicative to participle makes the verb dependent on ἀπήγγειλεν. This disturbs the parallelism identified by Kunz. The translator of the Septuagint was certainly not of the opinion that David first asked permission.

## BEING CLEANSED

The clause **וְהָיָא מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת מִשְׁמֵאָתָהּ** is usually taken as a comment on Bathsheba’s ritual cleansing after menses. Mostly, this is taken to be the same event that David saw from the roof. In this line of thought, the comment is chronologically misplaced either to indicate Bathsheba’s fertility (Bach 1997:135; Kunz 2004:165-167) or to indicate without doubt that David is the father of the child (Exum 1996:49; Garsiel 1993:255).

Recently, Klein (2000:50) and Frymer-Kensky (2002:147) have argued that **וְהָיָא מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת מִשְׁמֵאָתָהּ** can not refer to the bathing recounted in verse 2. Frymer-Kensky (2002:147) points out that in Leviticus 15, there is no reference to a woman’s ritual bathing after menses. This is strange, since ritual bathing is prescribed for many an unclean occurrence in this and the surrounding chapters. According to Frymer-Kensky (2002:147), the interpretation of Bathsheba’s first bathing as cleansing ritual is “anachronistically based on later rabbinic law.” Klein (2000:50) agrees, noting that **מִשְׁמֵאָתָהּ** usually “refers to sexual or to ethical and religious uncleanness”, thereby implying that Bathsheba cleansed herself after having sexual relations with David. Frymer-Kensky (2002:147) further calls attention to the fact that ritual bathing was indeed prescribed in Leviticus 15 after *all* sexual relations. This would give Bathsheba a more active role in the story, leisurely bathing in the palace before returning home.

The Septuagint does not support Klein and Frymer-Kensky’s hypothesis.

Although ἀκαθαρσία is used of ethical uncleanness (Leviticus 20:21), it is also used of uncleanness effected by menses<sup>9</sup> (Leviticus 15:24). The translation of כְּהִרְמָשׁ in the Septuagint remains impartial. Verbs, however, are notoriously more difficult to translate than nouns (Olofsson 1990:11). This is reflected in the translation of מִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה. The aspect of time serves to betray his understanding of the text, as the verb is rendered a present participle (ἀγιαζομένη). This indicates an action concurrent with the main verb (ἐκοιμήθη). Furthermore, ἀγιαζομένη is passive.<sup>10</sup> According to the Septuagint text, Bathsheba was already ritually cleansed while having sexual relations with David.

### BATHSHEBA'S DIRECT SPEECH

Bathsheba's direct speech in verse 5 can be seen as another important point in assessing her guilt. "[T]he fact that these are her only words in the narrative virtually requires the reader to put them under some kind of interpretative pressure", as Hammond (1992:69) declares. This is the only glimpse the reader is allowed into the mind of Bathsheba. Even though Caspi and Cohen's (1999:53) statement that the Masoretic text highlights her "anxiety" might be a case of eisegesis, it must be noted that Bathsheba's direct speech in the entire narrative is but two words: אֲנִי הִנֵּנִי. The Septuagint recounts this in no less than five words (ἐγώ εἰμι ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχω). A longer text is unavoidable, since הִנֵּנִי is translated by three words. However, the εἰμι seems redundant. Apparently, the translator of the Septuagint did not regard the abruptness of the Hebrew text as indicative of some or other fact. It was taken at face value: Bathsheba simply sent a message to David telling him that she is pregnant. It might be noted that

<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 20:21b: ὃς ἂν λάβῃ τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀκαθαρσία ἐστίν. ("Whoever shall take the wife of his brother – it is uncleanness.")

Leviticus 15:24b: ἐὰν δὲ κοίτη τις κοιμηθῇ μετ' αὐτῆς καὶ γένηται ἡ ἀκαθαρσία αὐτῆς ἐπ' αὐτῷ. ("And if on a bed someone shall lie with her, her uncleanness will also be on him.")

<sup>10</sup> It can also be middle; however, this would not quite make sense in the context.



the word order in the Septuagint differs from the Masoretic text. However, the same word order as in the Septuagint (אָנְכִי הָרָה) is found in 4QSam<sup>a</sup> (Fincke 2001:193).<sup>11</sup> This may point to a *Vorlage* of the Septuagint that differs from the Masoretic text at this point (cf Marcos 1994:25). One should indeed be wakeful of attributing differences between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint to translation technique, especially if the Septuagint agrees with documents from Qumran (Marcos 1994:9).

## DAVID

Some thoughts on David would also be in order. If he can be shown to be completely blameless, this would make Bathsheba guilty by default. At least in the case of verse 2, one can surmise that the translator of the Septuagint did not regard David as setting out with the intention to do a malicious deed. The Masoretic text here has the *hithpa'el* (וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ), implying that this was a habitual stroll on the roof (Kunz 2004:153). The same can be said of the imperfect tense of the Greek verb (περιεπάτει). Once again, the translator has faithfully reproduced an aspect of the Hebrew text. In the Septuagint version of the narrative, David is also in the habit of walking around on the roof. The sight of Bathsheba bathing is not an intentional violation of privacy, but rather due to happenstance.

Wevers (1953:40-41) is of the opinion that, although the translator of this part of the Septuagint “shows his high regard for royalty”, he does not hesitate to condemn David for sinning. One should note that some of Wevers’ conclusions have since been proven wrong. For instance, Wevers (1953:40)

---

<sup>11</sup> 4QSam<sup>a</sup> is an important scroll for textual criticism of both the Septuagint tradition and the Masoretic text (Van der Kooij 1982:182). In fact, Orlinsky (1975:113) takes 4QSam<sup>a</sup> and 4QSam<sup>b</sup> as the “most important of the Dead Sea Scrolls for the textual criticism of the Bible”. For a good overview of the history of the textual studies of 2 Samuel in the Septuagint until 1982, see Van der Kooij (1982:*passim*) and Muraoka (1982:*passim*), especially with regard to the textual recensions of this text.

takes ὁ ποιήσας τοῦτο in 2 Samuel 12:7 as an addition to the text, further elucidating David's guilt (after Nathan exclaimed σὺ εἶ ὁ ἀνὴρ – “you are the man!”). However, these words are also found in 4QSam<sup>a</sup> (Fincke 2001:201). This would imply that it is not the translator of the Septuagint that added the clause, but rather that it was already present in the translator's *Vorlage*. Nevertheless, Wevers' study of the Septuagint text is still of value, and not all his conclusions are suspect. The Septuagint does not attempt to hide David's guilt. It has already been shown above that David is portrayed by the translator of the Septuagint as playing an active role in the narrative. He is still the one with the initiative in verse 4. It must also be added, even if it is an *argumentum ex silentio*, that in the Masoretic text as well as the Septuagint David is the only one blamed by the narrator in verse 27b.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Even though the LXX text of 2 Samuel 11:2-5 is translated from the Hebrew quite literally, some slight differences between the LXX and the MT emerge. These differences help us, at least to some extent, to gain insight into the translator's opinion regarding Bathsheba. Whether she is guilty or not is not stated explicitly in the text. Neither is Bathsheba implicated by the Septuagint text. In fact, ambiguities in the Masoretic text that might point to Bathsheba being guilty are underplayed in the Septuagint. She is granted (in some LXX traditions, at least) a more passive role than in the Masoretic text. This might be due to the patriarchal society in which the Septuagint was formed. However, this might be a case in which this society overplayed its hand; by assigning Bathsheba a lesser role, more guilt is placed on one of their own – David.

---

<sup>12</sup> Καὶ πονηρὸν ἐφάνη τὸ ῥῆμα ὃ ἐποίησεν Δαυὶδ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς κυρίου. (“And the thing which David did appeared evil in the eyes of the Lord.”)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, A A 1989. *2 Samuel*. Dallas: Word Books.
- Bach, A 1997. *Women, seduction, and betrayal in biblical narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, R C 1990. *David in love and war: the pursuit of power in 2 Samuel 10-12*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Barthélemy, D, Gooding, D W, Lust, J & Tov, E 1986. *The story of David and Goliath*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Brenner, A (ed) 2000. *Samuel and Kings: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Brooke, G J (ed.) 1992. *Women in the biblical tradition*. Lewiston: The Edwin Meller Press.
- Campbell, F A 2005. *2 Samuel*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Caspi, M M & Cohen, S B 1999. *Still waters run deep: five women of the Bible speak*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Exum, J C 1996. Bathsheba plotted, shot, and painted, *Semeia* 74:47-73.
- Fincke, A 2001. *The Samuel Scroll from Qumran: 4QSam<sup>a</sup> restored and compared to the Septuagint and 4QSam<sup>c</sup>*. Leiden: Brill.
- Frymer-Kensky, T 2002. *Reading the women of the Bible*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Garsiel, M 1993. The story of David and Bathsheba: a different approach, *CBQ* 55/2:244-262.
- Hammond, G 1992. Michal, Tamar, Abigail and what Bathsheba said: notes towards a really inclusive translation of the Bible, in Brooke 1992:53-70.
- Kim, H C P & Nyengele, M F 2003. Murder s/he wrote? A cultural and psychological reading of 2 Samuel 11-12, in Kirk-Duggan 2003:95-116.
- Kirk-Duggan, C A (ed.) 2003. *Pregnant passion: gender, sex, and violence in the Bible*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Klein, L R 2000. Bathsheba revealed, in Brenner 2000:47-64.
- Kunz, A 2004. *Die Frauen und der König David: Studien zur Figuration von Frauen in den Daviderzählungen*. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.
- Liddell, H G & Scott, R 1889. *An intermediate Greek-English lexicon*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Lust, J 1986. Response, in Barthélemy, Gooding, Lust & Tov 1986:87-91.
- Marcos, N F 1994. *Scribes and translators: Septuagint and Old Latin in the Books of Kings*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- McCarter, P K 1984. *II Samuel: a new translation with introduction, notes and commentary*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Müllner, I 1998. Blickwechsel: Batseba und David in Romanen des 20. Jahrhunderts, *Biblical Interpretation* 6/3-4:348-366.
- Muraoka, T 1982. The Greek texts of Samuel-Kings: incomplete translations or recensional activity? *Abr-n.* 21:28-49.
- Olofsson, S 1990. *The LXX version: a guide to the translation technique of the Septuagint*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.

- Orlinsky, H M 1975. The Septuagint as Holy Writ and the philosophy of the translators, *HUCA* 46:89-114.
- Rahlfs, A 1935. *Septuaginta*. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt.
- Rivers, F 2003. *A lineage of grace*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers.
- Sternberg, M 1985. *The poetics of biblical narrative: ideological literature and the drama of reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tov, E 1986. The nature of the differences between MT and the LXX, in Barthélemy, Gooding, Lust & Tov 1986:19-46.
- Van der Kooij, A 1982. De tekst van Samuel en het Tekskritisch Onderzoek, *NedThT* 36/3:177-204.
- Vom Orde, K 2002. *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*. Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag.
- Wevers, J W 1953. A study in the exegetical principles underlying the Greek text of 2 Sm 11:2 – 1 Kings 2:11, *CBQ* 15/1:30-45.
- Yee, G A 1988. Fraught with background: literary ambiguity in II Samuel 11, *Interp.* 42:240-255.

Ronald H van der Bergh  
Department of Ancient Languages  
University of Pretoria  
Pretoria  
e-mail: ronald@newtestament.co.za