CHAPTER 20

And Abraham journeyed onward from there to the Negeb region and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar.

And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech the king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. And God came to Abimelech in a night-dream and said to him, "You are a dead man because of the woman you took, as she is another's wife." But Abimelech had not come near her, and he said, "My Lord, will you slay a nation even if innocent? Did not he say to me, 'She is my sister'? and she, she, too, said, 'He is my brother.' With a pure heart and with clean hands I have done this." And God said to him in the dream, "Indeed, I know that with a pure heart you have done this, and I on My part have kept you from offending against Me, and so I have not allowed you to touch her. Now, send back the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will intercede for you, and you may live. And if you do not send her back, know that you are doomed to die, you and all that belongs to you."

And Abimelech rose early in the morning and called to all his servants, and he spoke these things in their hearing, and the men were terribly afraid. And Abimelech called to Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us, and how have I offended you, that you should bring upon me and my kingdom so great an offense? Things that should not be done you have done to me." And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you imagine when you did this thing?" And Abraham said, "For I thought, there is surely no fear of God in this place and they will kill me because of my wife. And, in point of fact, she is my sister, my guilty in destroying the entire nation of Sodom. If the king of Gerar chooses, oddly, to refer to himself as "nation," leaning on the traditional identification of monarch with people, it is because he is, in effect, repeating Abraham's question to God: will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?

And, she, she, too. This repetitive splutter of indignation is vividly registered in the Hebrew, though the existing translations smooth it over.

I have not allowed you to touch her. The means by which consummation is prevented is intimated, cannily, only at the very end of the story.

will you slay a nation even if innocent? This phrase, which might also be construed "slay a nation even with the innocent," sounds as peculiar in the Hebrew as in translation, and has led some critics to see the word "nation" (goy) as a scribal error. But the apparent deformation of idiom has a sharp thematic point. "Innocent" (tsadiq) is the very term Abraham insisted on in questioning God as to whether He would really slay the innocent together with the

9. and, she, she, too. This repetitive splutter of indignation is vividly registered in the Hebrew, though the existing translations smooth it over.

10. And Abimelech . . . said . . . and Abimelech said. The repetition of the formula for introducing direct speech, with no intervening response from Abraham, is pointedly expressive. Abimelech vehemently castigates Abraham (with good reason), and Abraham stands silent, not knowing what to say. And so Abimelech repeats his upbraiding, in shorter form (verse 10).

11-12. When Abraham finally speaks up, his words have the ring of a speaker floundering for self-justification. Introducing the explanation of Sarah's half-sister status—there might be a Mesopotamian legal background to such a
father's daughter, though not my mother's daughter, and she became my wife. And it happened, when the gods made me a wanderer from my father's house, that I told her, 'This is the kindness you can do for me: in every place to which we come, say of me, he is my brother.' And Abimelech took sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he sent back to him Sarah his wife. And Abimelech said, 'Look, my land is before you. Settle wherever you want.'

And to Sarah he said, "Look, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother. Let it hereby serve you as a shield against censorious eyes for everyone who is with you, and you are now publicly vindicated." And Abraham interceded with God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave-women, and they gave birth. For the LORD had shut fast every womb in the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

And the gods made me a wanderer. The word 'elohim, which normally takes a singular verb (though it has a plural suffix) when it refers to God, as everywhere else in this episode, is here linked with a plural verb. Conventional translation procedure renders this as "God," or "Heaven," but Abraham, after all, is addressing a pagan who knows nothing of this strange new idea of monotheism, and it is perfectly appropriate that he should choose his words accordingly, settling on a designation of the deity that ambiguously straddles polytheism and monotheism. It is also noteworthy that Abraham, far from suggesting that God has directed him to a promised land, stresses to the native king that the gods have imposed upon him a destiny of wandering.

And Abimelech took sheep and cattle. Unlike Pharoah in chapter 12, who bestows gifts on Abraham as a kind of bride-price, the noble Abimelech offers all this bounty after Sarah leaves his harem, as an act of restitution.

semi-incestuous marriage—he uses a windy argumentative locution, wegam 'omnah, "and, in point of fact," that may hint at a note of special pleading.

and they will kill me because of my wife. What Abraham fears is that Gerar, without "fear of God," will prove to be another Sodom. In Sodom, two strangers came into town and immediately became objects of sexual assault for the whole male population. Here again, two strangers come into town, one male and one female, and Abraham assumes the latter will be an object of sexual appropriation, the former the target of murder. In the event, he is entirely wrong: Abimelech is a decent, even noble, man; and the category of "Sodom" is not to be projected onto everything that is not the seed of Abraham. On the contrary, later biblical writers will suggest how easily Israel turns itself into Sodom.

Contrary to some textual critics who conjecture that this verse was inadvertently displaced from an earlier point in the story, it is a lovely piece of delayed narrative exposition. Shutting up the womb is a standard idiom for infertility, which ancient Hebrew culture, at least on the proverbial level, attributes to the woman, not to the man. But given the earlier reference to Abimelech's having been prevented from touching Sarah, this looks suspiciously like an epidemic of impotence that has struck Abimelech and his people—an idea not devoid of comic implications—from which the Gerarite women would then suffer as the languishing partners of the deflected sexual unions. (Nahmanides sees an allusion to impotence here.) It is noteworthy that only in this version of the sister-wife story is the motif of infertility introduced. Its presence nicely aligns the Abimelech episode with what precedes and what follows. That is, first we have the implausible promise of a son to the aged Sarah; then a whole people is wiped out; then the desperate act of procreation by Lot's daughters in a world seemingly emptied of men; and now an entire kingdom blighted with an interruption of procreation. The very next words of the story—one must remember that there were no chapter breaks in the original Hebrew text, for both chapter and verse divisions were introduced only in the late Middle Ages—are the fulfillment of the promise of progeny to Sarah: "And the LORD singled out Sarah as He had said." As several medieval Hebrew commentators note, the plague of infertility also guarantees that Abimelech cannot be imagined as the begetter of Isaac.
And the LORD singled out Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. And Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the set time that God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised Isaac his son when he was eight days old, as God had charged him. And Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac his son was born to him. And Sarah said,

"Laughter has God made me, 
Whoever hears will laugh at me."

7. uttered. The Hebrew milel is a term that occurs only in poetic texts and is presumably high diction, perhaps archaic.

8. I have borne a son in his old age. In a symmetrical reversal of God's report in chapter 18 of Sarah's interior monologue, where Abraham's advanced age was suppressed, Sarah's postpartum poem, like the narrator's report that precedes it, mentions only his old age. Hers is implied by her marveling reference to herself as an old woman suckling infants, a pointed reversal of her own allusion in chapter 18 to her shriveled body.

9. laughing. Hebrew metsa'eq. The same verb that meant "mocking" or "joking" in Lot's encounter with his sons-in-law and that elsewhere in the Patriarchal narratives refers to sexual dalliance. It also means "to play." (Although the conjugation here is piel and Sarah's use of the same root in verse 6 is in the qal conjugation, attempts to establish a firm semantic differentiation between the deployment of the root in the two different conjugations do not stand up under analysis.) Some medieval Hebrew exegetes, trying to find a justification for Sarah's harsh response, construe the verb as a reference to homosexual advances, though that seems far-fetched. Mocking laughter would surely suffice to trigger her outrage. Given the fact, moreover, that she is concerned lest Ishmael encroach on her son's inheritance, and given the inscription of her son's name in this crucial verb, we may also be invited to construe it as "Isaacing-it"—that is, Sarah sees Ishmael presuming to play the role of Isaac, child of laughter, presuming to be the legitimate heir.

10. Drive out this slavegirl. In language that nicely catches the indignation of the legitimate wife, Sarah refers to neither Hagar nor Ishmael by name, but instead insists on the designation of low social status.
And God heard the voice of the lad and God’s messenger called out from the heavens and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the lad’s voice where he is.

Rise, lift up the lad and hold him by the hand, for a great nation will I make him.”

And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the skin with water and gave to the lad to drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew up and dwelled in the wilderness, and he became a seasoned bowman. And he dwelled in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt.

Abraham’s eyes because of his son. And God said to Abraham, “Let it not seem evil in your eyes on account of the lad and on account of your slavegirl. Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your seed be acclaimed. But the slavegirl’s son, too, I will make a nation, for he is your seed.”

And Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder, and he gave her the child, and sent her away, and she went wandering through the wilderness of Beersheba. And when the water in the skin was gone, she flung the child under one of the bushes and went off and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away, for she thought, “Let me not see when the child dies.” And she sat at a distance and raised her voice and wept.

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And it happened at that time that Moses grew and went out to his brothers and saw their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. And he turned this way and that and saw that there was no man about, and he struck down the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. And he went out the next day, and, look, two Hebrew men were brawling, and he said to the one in the wrong, "Why should you strike your fellow?" And he said, "Who set you as a man prince and judge over us? Is it to kill me that you mean as you killed the Egyptian?" And Moses was afraid and he thought, "Surely, the thing and hence "son." The folk etymology relates it to the Hebrew verb mashah, "to draw out from water." Perhaps the active form of the verb used for the name mosheh, "he who draws out," is meant to align the naming with Moses's future destiny of rescuing his people from the water of the Sea of Reeds.

12. and saw there was no man about. Although the obvious meaning is that he wanted to be sure the violent intervention he intended would go unobserved, some interpreters have proposed, a little apologetically, that he first looked around to see if there was anyone else to step forward and help the beaten Hebrew slave. "About" is merely implied in the Hebrew. In any case, there is a pointed echoing of "man" ('ish)—an Egyptian man, a Hebrew man, and no man—that invites one to ponder the role and obligations of a man as one man victimizes another. When the fugitive Moses shows up in Midian, he will be identified, presumably because of his attire and speech, as "an Egyptian man."

13. Why should you strike your fellow? The first dialogue assigned to a character in biblical narrative typically defines the character. Moses's first speech is a reproof to a fellow Hebrew and an attempt to impose a standard of justice ('asha', "the one in the wrong," is a legal term).

14. Who set you as a man prince and judge over us? These words of the brawler in the wrong not only preface the revelation that Moses's killing of the Egyptian is no secret but also adumbrate a long series of later incidents in which the Israelites will express resentment or rebelliousness toward Moses. Again, "man" is stressed. Later, "the man Moses" will become a kind of epithet for Israel's first leader.


15. Midian. The geographical location of this land in different biblical references does not seem entirely fixed, perhaps because the Midianites were seminomads. Moses's country of refuge would appear to be a semidesert region bordering Egypt on the east, to the west by northwest of present-day Eilat.

sat down by the well. The verb yashav, "sat down," is identical with the previous verb in this sentence, where it reflects its other meaning, "to dwell" or "to settle." It makes sense for the wayfarer to pause to rest and refresh himself at an oasis as Moses does here. "The well" has the idiomatic force of "a certain well."

16. seven daughters . . . came and drew water. By this point, the ancient audience would have sufficient signals to recognize the narrative convention of the betrothal type-scene (compare Abraham's servant and Rebekah, Genesis 24, and Jacob and Rachel, Genesis 29): the future bridegroom, or his surrogate, encounters a nubile young woman, or women, at a well in a foreign land; water is drawn; the woman hurries to bring home news of the stranger's arrival; he is invited to a meal; the betrothal is agreed on. In keeping with the folktales stylization of the Moses story, the usual young woman is multiplied by the formulaic number seven.

17. the shepherds came and drove them off. Only in this version of the betrothal scene is there an actual struggle between hostile sides at the well. Moses's intervention to "save" (hoshi'a) the girls accords perfectly with his future role as commander of the Israelite forces in the wilderness and the liberator, moshi'a, of his people.

18. Why have you hurried back today? With great narrative economy, the expected betrothal-scene verb, "to hurry," miher, occurs not in the narrator's report but in Reuel's expression of surprise to his daughters.
19. he even drew water for us and watered the flock. Their report highlights the act of drawing water, the Hebrew stressing the verb by stating it in the infinitive before the conjugated form—Daloth daloth (in this translation, “even drew”). The verb is different from mashah, the term associated with Moses’s name, because it is the proper verb for drawing water, whereas mashah is used for drawing something out of water. In any case, this version of the scene at the well underscores the story of a hero whose infancy and future career are intimately associated with water.

20. Call him that he may eat bread. “Call” here has its social sense of “invite,” and “bread” is the common biblical synecdoche for “food.” Reuel’s eagerness to show hospitality indicates that he is a civilized person, and in the logic of the type-scene, the feast offered the stranger will lead to the betrothal.


22. Gershom. . . A sojourner have I been. In keeping with biblical practice, the naming-speech reflects folk etymology, breaking the name into ger, “sojourner,” and sham, “there,” though the verbal root of the name g-r-sh would appear to refer to banishment.

23. bondage. The Hebrew avodah is the same term rendered as “work” in chapter 1.
charge you. Your own eyes have seen that which the LORD did at Baal Peor, for every man that went after Baal Peor did the LORD your God destroy from your midst. But you, the ones clinging to the LORD your God, are all of you alive today. See, I have taught you the statutes and the laws as the LORD my God has charged me, to do thus within the land into which you are about to come to take hold of it. And you shall keep and do, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and will say, 'Only a wise and understanding people is this great nation.' For what great nation is there that has gods close to it like the LORD our God when­ever we call to Him? And what great nation is there that has just statutes and laws like all this teaching that I am about to set before you today? Only be you on the watch and watch yourself closely lest you forget the things that your own eyes have seen and lest they swerve from your heart—all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your sons and to your sons' sons: the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb when the LORD said to me, 'Assemble the people to Me that I may have them hear My words, so that they learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the soil, and so that they teach their sons.' And you came forward and stood at the bottom of the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire to the heart of the heavens—darkness, cloud, and dense fog. And the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire. The sound of words you did hear but no image did you see except the sound. And He told you His covenant that He charged you to do, the Ten Words, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And me did the LORD charge at that time to teach you statutes and laws for you to do in the land into which you are crossing over to take hold of it. And you shall be very watchful of yourselves, for you saw no image on the day the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire, lest you act ruinously and make you a sculpted image of any likeness, the form of male or of female, the form

4. you, the ones clinging to the LORD your God, are all of you alive today. The very physical existence of the audience for Moses's sermon is palpable proof of the principle he announced at the beginning of the sermon, "so you may live."

6. Only a wise and understanding people is this great nation. The primacy of wisdom in the worldview of Deuteronomy is sharply reflected here. Israel's greatness as the other nations come to recognize it is not in its fecundity and military might (as, for example, in Balaam's oracles in Numbers) but in its wis­dom, demonstrated by its adherence to a set of just statutes and laws. The next lines (verses 7–8) are testimony to God's decision to be close to Israel through the statutes and teachings He reveals to them.

10. the day that you stood before the LORD. "The day" or "on the day" is an epic locution for "when." Having begun with a general exhortation to cling to God's laws, the sermon now focuses in on the defining moment four decades earlier when Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and God revealed to them his law in thunder and lightning.

12. The sound of words you did hear but no image did you see. The account of the Sinai epiphany in Exodus is less rigorous about excluding the aspect of sight. The Israelites there are enjoined to keep their distance precisely in order that they will see nothing, and then the seventy elders in the sacred feast on the mountain are vouchsafed a vision of the effulgence surrounding God. The Deuteronomist, by contrast, is sternly aniconic, in keeping with his steady polemic against all cults of divine images; he is a writer who insists on hearing the divine, and seeing only God's portentous acts in history.

15. be very watchful of yourselves. It should be noted that the Hebrew freely swings between second-person plural and second-person singular, an oscillation perfectly idiomatic in biblical Hebrew and by no means to be attributed to a collation of different sources. It may be that the speaker on occasion switches to the singular form in order to emphasize the effect of imperative address to each individual, but that is not certain.

16. a sculpted image of any likeness, the form. Philologists have sought to draw technical differences among these terms, but the manifest point of their deployment here is the stylistic force of their synonymy: any manner or shape of image or icon will lead Israel on the path to ruin.

16-18. the form of male or of female . . . of any beast . . . on the earth . . . of any winged bird . . . in the heavens . . . of anything that crawls on the ground . . . of any fish that is in the waters under the earth. The ringing language of the ser-
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DEUTERONOMY 4:18

of any beast that is on the earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the heavens, the form of anything that crawls on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters under the earth, lest you raise your eyes to the heavens and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the array of the heavens, and you be led astray and bow down to them and worship them, for the LORD your God allotted them to all the peoples under the heavens. But you did the LORD take and He brought you out from the iron's forge, from Egypt, to become for Him a people in estate as this day. And the LORD was incensed with me because of your words and He swore not to let me cross the Jordan and not to let me come into the goodly land that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate. For I am about to die in this land, I am not to cross the Jordan, but you are to cross over and you will take hold of this goodly land. Be you on the watch, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He has sealed with you, and you make for yourselves a sculpted image of any sort, against which the LORD your God has charged you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous god. When you beget sons and sons of sons and are long in the land, and you act ruinously and make a sculpted image of any sort and do evil in the eyes of the LORD your God to anger Him, I have called to witness against you the heavens and the earth that you shall surely perish quickly from upon the land into which you are about to cross the Jordan to take hold of it. You shall not long endure upon it, for you will

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DEUTERONOMY 4:20

peoples under the heavens. But you did the LORD take and He brought you out from the iron's forge, from Egypt, to become for Him a people in estate as this day. And the LORD was incensed with me because of your words and He swore not to let me cross the Jordan and not to let me come into the goodly land that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate. For I am about to die in this land, I am not to cross the Jordan, but you are to cross over and you will take hold of this goodly land. Be you on the watch, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He has sealed with you, and you make for yourselves a sculpted image of any sort, against which the LORD your God has charged you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous god. When you beget sons and sons of sons and are long in the land, and you act ruinously and make a sculpted image of any sort and do evil in the eyes of the LORD your God to anger Him, I have called to witness against you the heavens and the earth that you shall surely perish quickly from upon the land into which you are about to cross the Jordan to take hold of it. You shall not long endure upon it, for you will
DEUTERONOMY 4:27

27. And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples and you shall be left men few in number among the nations where the
LORD will drive you. And you shall worship there their gods that are
human handiwork, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat
nor smell. And you shall search for the LORD your God from there, and
you shall find him when you seek Him with all your heart and with all
your being. When you are in straits and all these things find you in
time to come, you shall turn back to the LORD your God and heed His
voice. For the LORD your God is a merciful god. He will not let you go
and will not destroy you and will not forget your fathers' covenant that

DEUTERONOMY 4:32

32. from the day God created a human on the earth . . . Has a people heard
God's voice speaking from the midst of the fire. These sentences bind together
in a summarizing flourish the topics of creation and the Sinai epiphany that
were underscored earlier in this speech.

33. still lived. The "still" is added in the translation for clarity. The obvious sense
of the verb is "survived" but the level of diction of that English term would
betray the monosyllabic plainness of the Hebrew. "Still lived," it should be
noted, takes us back to "so you may live" at the very beginning of the sermon.

34. to take Him a nation from within a nation. In the almost musical structure
of this oratory, we now move back to the invocation of the Exodus as testimony
in verse 20.

35. their seed after them. The Hebrew says literally "his seed after him," but
there is no real confusion because the usage has simply moved to a grammati-
cal singular for a collective entity.
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SAMUEL II:26

And Uriah's wife heard that Uriah her man was dead, and she keened 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.

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.

CHAPTER 12

And the LORD sent Nathan to David, and he came to him and said to him: "Two men there were in a single town, one was rich and the other another. Battle all the more fiercely against the city and destroy it.' And so rouse his spirits."

1. And the LORD sent. The second stage of the story of David and Bathsheba—the phase of accusation and retribution—begins with a virtual pun on a prominent thematic word of the first half of the story. David was seen repeatedly "sending" messengers, arranging for the satisfaction of his lust and the murder of his mistress's husband through the agency of others. By contrast, God here "sends" his prophet to David—not an act of bureaucratic manipulation but the use of a human vehicle to convey a divine message of conscience.

Two men there were... Nathan's parable, from its very first syllables, makes clear its own status as a traditional tale and a poetic construction. The way one begins a storyteller's tale in the Bible is with the formula "there was a man"—compare the beginning of Job, or the beginning of the story of Hannah and Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1. The Hebrew prose of the parable also is set off strongly from the language of the surrounding narrative by its emphatically rhythmic character, with a fondness for parallel pairs of terms—an effect this translation tries to reproduce. The vocabulary, moreover, includes several terms that are relatively rare in biblical prose narrative: kivsah (ewe), ra'ish (poor), helekh (wayfarer), 'oreah (traveler). Finally the two "men" of the opening formula are at the end separated out into "rich man," "poor man," and "the man who had come" (in each of these cases, Hebrew 'ish is used). This formal repetition prepares the way, almost musically, for Nathan's two-word accusatory explosion, 'atah ha'ish, "You are the man!" Given the patently literary character of Nathan's tale, which would have been transparent to anyone native to ancient Hebrew culture, it is a little puzzling that David should so precipitously take the tale as a report of fact requiring judicial action. Nathan may be counting on the possibility that the obverse side of guilty conscience in a man like David is the anxious desire to do the right thing. As king, his first obligation is to protect his subjects and to dispense justice, especially to the disadvantaged. In the affair of Bathsheba and Uriah, he has done precisely the opposite. Now, as he listens to Nathan's tale, David's compensatory zeal to be a champion of jus-
poor. The rich man had sheep and cattle, in great abundance. And the poor man had nothing save one little ewe that he had bought. And he nurtured her and raised her with him together with his sons. From his crast she would eat and from his cup she would drink and in his lap she would lie, and she was to him like a daughter. And a wayfarer came to the rich man, and it seemed a pity to him to take from his own sheep and cattle to prepare for the traveler who had come to him, and he took the poor man’s ewe and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” And David’s anger flared hot against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, doomed is the man who has done this!

3. eat...drink...lie. As Polzin observes, these terms effect full contact with the story of David and Bathsheba, being the three activities David sought to engage Uriah in with his wife (compare Uriah’s words in 11:11). The parable begins to become a little fantastic here in the interest of drawing close to the relationships of conjugal intimacy and adultery to which it refers: the little lamb eats from her master’s crust, drinks from his cup, and lies in his lap (“lap” as a biblical idiom has connotations not merely of parental sheltering but also of sexual intimacy: compare verse 8, “I gave...your master’s wives in your lap”).

4. it seemed a pity to him. The Hebrew uses an active verb, “he pitied,” preparing for a literal ironic reversal in verse 6, “he had no pity”—or, “he did not pity.” To prepare. The Hebrew is literally “to do” or “to make.” When the verb has as its direct object a live edible animal, it means to slaughter and cook.

5. David’s anger flared hot against the man. Nathan’s rhetorical trap has now snapped shut. David, by his access of anger, condemns himself, and he is now the helpless target of the denunciation that Nathan will unleash.

Doomed is the man. Actually, according to biblical law someone who has illegally taken another’s property would be subject to fourfold restitution (verse 6), not to the death penalty. (The Hebrew phrase is literally “son of death”—that is, deserving death, just as in 1 Samuel 26:16.) David pronounces this death sentence in his outburst of moral indignation, but it also reflects the way that the parable conflates the sexual “taking” of Bathsheba with the murder of Uriah: the addition of Bathsheba to the royal harem could have been intimated simply by the rich man’s placing the ewe in his flock, but as the parable is told, the ewe must be slaughtered, blood must be shed. David himself will not be condemned to die, but death will hang over his house. As the Talmud (Yoma 22B) notes, the fourfold retribution for Uriah’s death will be worked out in the death or violent fate of four of David’s children: the

And the poor man’s ewe he shall pay back fourfold, in as much as he has done this thing, and because he had no pity!” And Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel: It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I Who saved you from the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives in your lap, and I gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if that be too little, I would give you even as much again. Why did you despise the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in His eyes? Uriah the Hittite you struck down with the sword, and his wife you took for yourself as wife, and him you have killed by the sword of the Ammonites! And so now, the sword shall not swerve from your house evermore, seeing you

7. Thus says the LORD God of Israel. After the direct knife thrust of “You are the man!”, Nathan hastens to produce the prophetic messenger formula in its extended form, in this way proclaiming divine authorization for the dire imprecation he pronounces against David and his house.

7–8. It is I who anointed you...And if that be too little... In the first part of this speech, there are several ironic echoes of David’s prayer in Chapter 7, in which David thanks God for all His benefactions and professes himself unworthy of them.

8. and your master’s wives in your lap. At least in the account passed down to us, there is no mention elsewhere of David’s having taken sexual possession of his predecessor’s consorts, though this was a practice useful for its symbolic force in a transfer of power, as Absalom will later realize.

9. Uriah the Hittite you struck down with the sword. The obliquity of working through agents at a distance, as David did in contriving the murder of Uriah, is exploded by the brutal directness of the language: it is as though David himself had wielded the sword. Only at the end of the sentence are we given the explanatory qualification “by the sword of the Ammonites.”

10. the sword shall not swerve from your house evermore. As Bar-Efrat notes, David’s rather callous message to Joab, “the sword sometimes consumes one way and sometimes another,” is now thrown back in his face. The story of David’s sons, not to speak of his descendants in later generations, will in fact turn out to be a long tale of conspiracy, internecine struggle, and murder. One of the most extraordinary features of the whole David narrative is that this story of the founding of the great dynasty of Judah is so directly linked to the moral and secular disinheritance of David’s son, the first son of Bathsheba, Solomon.
have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' Thus says the LORD, 'I am about to raise up evil against you from your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your fellowman, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it in secret but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'” And David said to Nathan, “I have offended against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD has also remitted your offense—you shall not die. But since you surely spurned the LORD in this thing, the son born to you is doomed to die.”

And Nathan went to his house, and the LORD afflicted the child whom Bathsheba wife of Uriah the Hittite had born David, and he fell gravely ill. And David implored God for the sake of the lad, and David fasted, tragic paradox more profoundly than William Faulkner in his recasting of the story in 

absalom, absalom! the author of the David story continually exercises an unblinking vision of David and the institution of the monarchy that exposes their terrible flaws even as he accepts their divinely authorized legitimacy.

11. I am about to raise up evil against you from your own house. As befits a predictive curse, the agents of the evil are left unnamed. The disaster announced is clearly the rebellion of Absalom—as the reference to public cohabitation with David's wives makes clear—and the rape of Tamar and the murder of Amnon that lead up to it. But further "evil" from the house of David will persist to his deathbed, as Absalom's rebellion is followed by Adonijah's usurpation.

12. For you did it in secret but I will do this thing before all Israel. The calamitous misjudgments that defined David's dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah were a chain of bungled efforts at concealment. Now, in the retribution, all his crimes are to be revealed.

13. spurned the LORD. The Masoretic Text has "spurned the enemies of the Lord," a scribal euphemism to avoid making God the object of a harsh negative verb.

14. Bathsheba wife of Uriah the Hittite. At this point, she is still identified as wife of the husband she betrayed in conceiving this child.

15. He is dead. In Hebrew, this is a single syllable, met "dead"—a response corresponding to idiomatic usage because there is no word for "yes" in biblical Hebrew, and so the person questioned must respond by affirming the key term of the question. It should be noted, however, that the writer has contrived to repeat "dead" five times, together with one use of the verb "died," in these two verses: the ineluctable bleak fact of death is hammered home to us, just before David’s grim acceptance of it.

16. and he came and spent the night lying on the ground. And the elders of his house rose over him to rouse him up from the ground, but he would not, nor did he partake of food with them. And it happened on the seventh day that the child died, and David's servants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Look, while the child was alive, we spoke to him and he did not heed our voice, and how can we say to him, the child is dead? He will do some harm." And David saw that his servants were whispering to each other and David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." And David rose from the ground and bathed and rubbed himself with oil and changed his garments and came into the house of the LORD and worshiped and came back to his house and asked that food be set out for him, and he ate.

17. fasted...and spent the night lying on the ground. David’s acts pointedly replicate those of the man he murdered, who refused to go home and eat but instead spent the night lying on the ground with the palace guard.

18. on the seventh day. Seven days were the customary period of mourning. In this instance, David enacts a regimen of mourning, in an effort to placate God, before the fact of death.

He will do some harm. Presumably, the courtiers fear that David will do harm to himself in a frenzy of grief.

19. David rose...bathed...rubbed himself with oil... changed his garments...worshiped...ate. This uninterrupted chain of verbs signifies David's brisk resurrection of the activities of normal life, evidently without speech and certainly without explanation, as the courtiers’ puzzlement makes clear. The entire episode powerfully manifests that human capacity for surprise, and for paradoxical behavior, that is one of the hallmarks of the great biblical characters. David here acts in a way that neither his courtiers nor the audience of the story could have anticipated.
And his servants said to him, “What is this thing that you have done? For the sake of the living child you fasted and wept, and when the child was dead, you arose and ate food?” And he said, “While the child was still alive I fasted and wept, for I thought, 'Who knows, the LORD may favor me and the child will live.' And now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I am going to him and he will not come back to me.”

And David consoled Bathsheba his wife, and he came to her and lay with her, and she bore a son and called his name Solomon, and the LORD loved him. And He sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet and called his name Jedidiah, by the grace of the LORD.

And Joab battled against Rabbah of the Ammonites and he captured the royal city. And Joab sent messengers to David and said,

“I have battled against Rabbah, Yes, I captured the Citadel of Waters.”

And so now, assemble the rest of the troops and encamp against the city and capture it, lest it be I who capture the city and my name be...
QOHELET Chapter One

1. The words of Qohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem.
2. Merest breath, said Qohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath.
3. What gain is there for man in all his toil that he toils under the sun.
4. A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth endures forever.
5. The sun rises and the sun sets, and to its place it glides, there it rises.
6. It goes to the south and swings round to the north, round and round goes the wind, and on its rounds the wind returns.
7. All the rivers go to the sea, and the sea is not full. To the place that the rivers go, there they return to go.
8. All things are weary. A man cannot speak. The eye is not sated with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
9. That which was is that which will be, and that which was done is that which will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.
10. There is a thing of which one would say, “See this, it is new.” It already has been in the eons that were before us. 11. There is no remembrance of the first things nor of the last things that will be. They will have no remembrance with those who will be in the latter time.

12. I, Qohelet, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13. And I set my heart to inquire and seek through wisdom of all that is done under the sun—it is an evil business that God gave to the sons of man to busy themselves with.
14. I have seen all the deeds that are done under the sun, and, look, all is mere breath.
15. The crooked cannot turn straight nor can the lack be made good. 16. I spoke to my heart, saying: As for me, look, I increased and added wisdom beyond all who were before me over Jerusalem, and my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge. 17. And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know revelry and folly, for this, too, is herding the wind. 18. For in much wisdom is much worry, and he who adds wisdom adds pain.