

A REVIEW OF RECENT INTERPRETATIONS
OF THE STORY OF DAVID AND BATHSHEBA,
II SAMUEL 11.

The main point in the story of David and Bathsheba is the moral disapproval of King David for violating such strict prohibitions as "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife", "Thou shalt not commit adultery", "Thou shalt not kill". This moral trend was obscured by the apologetic exegesis of some of the sages of the Talmud.¹ Out of a desire to minimize the gravity of David's sin, they declared that "whoever says that David sinned, errs," because "everyone who goes to war for the House of David gives his wife a bill of divorce". According to this interpretation, Bathsheba was a divorced woman before she came to David; therefore there was no transgression of taking a married woman on David's part. And as for Uriah – so the sages explain – he was a "rebel against the kingdom" and was punished by law as he should have been. These interpretations were made to keep the idealistic image David had in the people's eyes.

However, even among the sages of the Talmud and among the medieval exegetes there were those whose mind was not at ease with these attempts at obscuring the facts.² So, for instance, Rav, the most important pupil of Yehuda Hanassi, remarked ironically that his master protects David only because he himself is one of David's descendants.³ And Don Yitzhak Abrabanel (1437-1508) one of the most important exegetes of the Middle Ages, returned to the story itself and questioned those Talmudic sages who washed David of his sins.

The obscuring of the educational and moral trend of the story, though of a different character from that of the sages, is also to be found in the study made by Perry and Sternberg⁴, two young scholars of general literature.

The authors suggested a reading of the story according to the system of "gap-filling", i. e. every story arouses questions about the heroes and the plot. A deep-going analysis of the text – with special attention paid to its context and oblique references – may enrich our understanding of the nature of the events and broaden our vision of the reality as represented in the story.

¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabat* Tractate, 56.

² Y. Heinemann, *Ways of the Aggadah*, Jerusalem, 1954.

³ *Shabat* Tractate 56.

⁴ M. Perry and M. Sternberg, 'The King through ironic eyes: the narrator's devices in the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba and two exercises on the theory of the narrative text.' *Hasifrut* (Hebr) I (1968/69), pp. 263-292 Eng. Sum. pp. 452-449.

Using this system, the two scholars came to the conclusion that the author of the biblical story purposely restricted his story in two ways. a) He did not give the reader any insight into the psychology of his heroes: did Bathsheba purposely bathe in sight of the king in order to excite him? what did Bathsheba and David feel towards each other at each stage of the story? did Uriah know what was going on between the king and his wife, Bathsheba? b) Not counting the last verse of the chapter (11:27) there is no allusion to the author's opinion: he does not reprove one side, nor does he identify himself with the suffering side, he only tells the facts. According to the two scholars the technique of understatement used by the biblical author causes a sharp confrontation between the restrained text and the full picture after the gaps are filled. An ironic shock is created, directed at David, through all the different stages of the story. The irony reaches a peak when David wants to send Uriah home, pretending to be concerned about the tired warrior's rest; but Uriah replies "The ark, and Israel, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing." This brings David's deed and Uriah's idealism into sharp contrast. Uriah remains faithful to his soldier comrades in the field.

The main point of this analysis of the story is the supposition that the irony in David's image is *total* and not restricted to the sins related in the story. In the opinion of the authors, David is also censured for having remained in Jerusalem while the whole army was pitched against the Ammonites; the king is also criticised for keeping a siesta and living in luxury, whereas the people are fighting on the battle-field. The two also found a comic strain in the story: in the description of the misunderstanding between Joab and the messenger sent to David to relate the military developments and Uriah's death.

The total irony and the comic element prove, according to the authors, that the irony not only serves a moral-educational theme, but is used for its own sake, in other words, for pure literary-aesthetic purposes.

Two other scholars, B. Arpali⁵ and U. Simon⁶, question the system of gap-filling in general and also part of its achievements. In their opinion the approach to the biblical story should be different from that in the study of general literature. These critics observe that chapter 11 is not an independent literary unit, since the parable of the little ewe lamb is a direct continuation of the story of David's sins. Therefore the two other scholars

⁵ B. Arpali, "Caution: a biblical story! Comments on the story of David and Bathsheba and on the problems of the biblical narrative" *Hasifrut* (Heb) II (1970), pp. 580-597 Eng. sum. pp. 686-684.

⁶ U. Simon, "An ironic approach to a bible story: on the interpretation of the story of David and Bathsheba", (Heb) *ibid*, pp. 598-607 Eng. sum. 684-683.

were wrong in their contention that there is no evaluation and judgment of the hero's deeds. Likewise, say these critics, there is nothing special about the absence of psychological data in this story, since that is also the case in other biblical stories, e. g. the sacrifice of Isaac or the stories of Joseph.

M. Perry and M. Sternberg replied in a detailed essay⁷ in which they maintain that the approach to biblical narrative prose should be established on the same methods used in general literary criticism.

In the present writer's opinion,⁸ Perry and Sternberg overlooked the fact that those stories of the Bible are artistic historiography which cannot be related to by literary methods alone. The first step towards their explanation should be the reconstruction of underlying historical reality, drawing from other biblical sources, epigraphical and archaeological findings etc. Afterwards, it would be well to compare the story itself with the historical reality thus reconstructed, thereby enabling us to unveil the trend of the biblical writer. The analysis of II Sam. 11 according to this method made it clear that Uriah evidently knew what had happened between David and his wife, since he was a member of David's unit of choice warriors, who served as royal guards.⁹ His comrades certainly must have hinted to him about what was going on; therefore Uriah would not let the king get away with it and refused to go home. The reconstruction of the battle near the walls of Rabbath-Ammon likewise makes it clear that Joab did not strictly execute David's secret command to kill only Uriah, for he launched a full battle during the course of which many soldiers were killed, among them Uriah the Hittite.

It becomes clear that the biblical author will not emphasise the position of any of the story's heroes, fearing that the description of the heroes' motivation and their emotional experiences will bring the readers to identify with this or that character. Any identification will draw away the readers' attention from the moral trend of the story which tells us, among other things, that any attempt to obscure the sin will result in further transgressions. David's attempt to hide his sin finally forced him to kill Uriah. When trying to camouflage Uriah's death, Joab caused the death of other soldiers. On the other hand, chapter 12 emphasises the power of confession and repentance to wipe out sins, for David is shown to be forgiven and is shown to keep his throne.

Review by Moshe Garsiel

⁷ M. Perry and M. Sternberg, "Caution, A Literary Text! Problems in the Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative", (Heb.), *ibid.*, pp. 608-663. (Eng. sum. pp. 682-679).

⁸ M. Garsiel, "The character and the aim of the story of David and Bathsheba", *Beth-Miqra* (Heb.), 49/2 (1972), pp. 162-182.

⁹ *idem.* "The military elite of King David" (Heb.), *J. Braslavi Jub. Vol.* (ed. I. Ben Shem), Jerusalem, 1970, p. 150.