

THE GEBIRAH AND FEMALE POWER¹

Amber Richardson

My girlhood fascination with princesses and queens has curbed only slightly, if at all, in my young adult years. I first encountered them in the fairy tale, as most of us do, but they have followed me into this stage of my life, and I see them everywhere now: in history, in the scriptures, and occasionally even in myself.

This gift, the gift of the omnipresent queen, is one that has been incredibly needed in my present life and work. I host a podcast called *On Sovereign Wings*, which broadcasts the stories of women who are seeking healing after sexual assault. I'm also writing a book entitled *Woman, Crowned*, which depicts she-sovereigns in scripture and draws connections between them and the divine woman we sometimes call the Queen of Heaven, or our Heavenly Mother.

The story I'd like to tell you this evening—or perhaps retell—is one that sits right at the crossroads of these two causes. As a survivor of sexual assault myself, the woman that I'd like to tell you about has become a central mentor to me. But I believe that her rise from victim to queen-mother has application far beyond those of us who have experienced sexual assault firsthand.

In many ways abuse of this kind is a bodily manifestation of something that women have encountered the world over. This passage from the biblical Song of Solomon illustrates what I mean in visceral symbolism. According to the text, in this passage it is a woman speaking. She says, “The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote

1. This talk was originally given at a HerStory devotional hosted by WOMB in American Fork, Utah on May 11, 2019.

me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me.”²

They smote me, they wounded me, they took away my veil from me. If we read the veil as a symbol of power, specifically as a symbol of female power,³ the emotional weight of this verse is likely familiar and evident. At key points throughout my life I have felt keenly disempowered as a woman. I imagine it’s not too much of a stretch to guess that many women in this room have felt the same. If you have, come on this journey with me. If you haven’t, would you take a moment and imagine what that might feel like, to be disempowered?

Within the Song of Solomon, the veil also hearkens to the archetype of the bride. The Song of Solomon prominently features an allegorical wedding feast and the love and loss that builds and winds up to that wedding. The woman speaking in verse seven is the bride-to-be. And it is in her search for her bridegroom and king that she is beaten and stripped of her uniquely feminine vestments.

The authorship of the Song of Solomon is highly disputed in academic circles, although it is traditionally associated with Solomon himself in some capacity. Perhaps that tradition stems from verses like this one, which seems to identify Solomon as the king and bridegroom in question: “Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold king Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals.”⁴

Did you catch who crowned King Solomon according to that verse? His mother. Interesting, isn’t it? Solomon’s mother is referenced numerous times throughout the wisdom texts. She appears in the introduction to the book of Proverbs, which reads, “My son, hear the instruction of

2. Song of Solomon 5:7.

3. 1 Corinthians 11:10.

4. Song of Solomon 3:11.

thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother.”⁵ Here she is again in an image too seldom talked about in 1 Kings: “And the King rose up to meet her, and bowed himself unto her, and sat down on his throne, and caused a seat to be set for the King’s mother; and she sat on his right hand.”⁶

In Hebrew, there’s a specific word that denotes Solomon’s mother’s position at the court, *Gebirah*; it means queen mother. The *Gebirah* was the most influential woman in ancient Israel, not only at court but within the kingdom as a whole. If we flip to another chapter of scripture, we’ll see a pivotal indication that the *Gebirah* wasn’t only respected by her son, but that her words were revered by all the people in the kingdom. Let’s take a look at Proverbs 31:1: “The words of King Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him.” Have you noticed that verse before? Is its significance hitting you the way it hit me? This verse tells us that an ancient *Gebirah*, an ancient queen mother, a *woman*, was the author of a chapter of scripture. Incidentally (or not incidentally at all, I should say), this particular chapter poses the infamous question, “Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.”⁷ The Hebrew word for virtue, *chayil*, is the same word used to describe men of valor who served in war. And so you could retranslate that question to read, “Who can find a powerful woman? for her price is far above rubies.” It makes sense to me that a *Gebirah*, especially a righteous one, would have many lessons to teach her son, and all of us, about female power.

But why all of this? What is the relevance of the *Gebirah* to sexual assault, or to disempowerment more generally? Well, Solomon’s mother was Bathsheba. And when you think about Bathsheba, what comes to mind first? Perhaps the immediate association is adultery, or you

5. Proverbs 1:8.

6. 1 Kings 2:19.

7. Proverbs 31:10.

remember her as David's temptation, or maybe you're like me and a surge of anger pulses through your veins when you think of her. Whatever came to your mind first, I would imagine that it was not this image of the sovereign, wise, and loving Gebirah. Boiled down, this conundrum mirrors exactly the prison that women find themselves in, within their own hearts. We see ourselves as bad, or shameful, or as objects, or as victims first and foremost, and not as the queens we truly are and are becoming.

There are as many interpretations of Bathsheba's story as there are hairs on my head. But I believe one interpretation in particular offers women a vital path forward toward the reclamation of self and female power. This, to me, seems like the necessary oxygen that so many of our sisters are struggling for. We can tell this story without vilifying David. We can tell this story without growing hatred in our hearts, just as we can tell our stories without becoming hardened or embittered. This is the path we must take if we are to heal and reclaim our whole and sovereign selves. Telling these stories does mean wading into pain. But I promise there is a way out of that pain.

When David was King, long ago in ancient Israel, he sent his thirty-seven strong men away to battle, but he stayed home in his palace. One night while he was out on *his* roof, he saw a woman bathing. He asked one of his guards who this woman was. "Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah," came the reply. Uriah was one of David's thirty-seven strong men. He knew that name. And he knew that Uriah was away, fighting. He also knew that this woman, Bathsheba, wasn't merely taking a hygienic bath. She was bathing in a *mikvah*, the pool of water where women would immerse themselves after their periods to demarcate their transition from ritually unclean to clean again. In one motion, David could change the course of this woman's life forever. And that is what he did. He sent his soldiers to take Bathsheba and bring her to his palace.

We have no record of her feelings or her words upon being received at the palace, but we do know that the law of Moses did not protect

married women from sexually predatory behavior. Even if it did, Bathsheba was a commoner and she had no political rights to refuse a king. Saying no could cost her her life.

Do we need the Bible to spell out how she felt? Could language do justice to those depths of sorrow even if it were attempted? I imagine that many of you sitting here don't need a record of her words to know how she felt.

Bathsheba conceived during that night with the king—the night she never asked for, or wanted, or seduced into being. What could she do now? Everyone in her community would know that this baby had been conceived outside wedlock because everyone in her community knew that her husband was fighting in the war. So she wrote a letter to David, pleading for his help. The punishment for adultery, and perceived adultery, was stoning.

What would you have done in her shoes?

When David received the letter, he sent out another one asking for Uriah to return home. This Uriah did, but he refused to sleep in his own bed because he was a man of honor. And so, not seeing another option, David sent Uriah back into battle, this time to the front line.

When news of Uriah's death reached Jerusalem, Nathan the prophet came to visit David. He brought with him a customized parable designed to catch David in his guilt. In the parable, Nathan compared David to a wealthy merchant with many sheep, and he compared Uriah to a poor and lowly shepherd who only possessed one little ewe lamb, a little ewe lamb he loved very much. Within the parable, the wealthy merchant, David, stole the little ewe lamb from the poor shepherd and slaughtered it. If David is likened to the merchant in the parable, and Uriah to the poor shepherd, how is Bathsheba represented? Bathsheba is symbolized by the little female lamb, an almost universal symbol of innocence. I'll also mention that, to my knowledge, Bathsheba is the only person compared to a lamb in scripture other than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The significance of this shared symbolism doesn't escape me.

This is typically where Bathsheba's story ends. We get caught up in moralizing David's gaze and decisions, and we get lost in the murky waters of his condemnation and repentance. All these are worthy lessons, although I would suggest that we can teach them in better ways that will release shame and ennoble our boys to free themselves from our dangerous culture that teaches them to objectify girls and women.

The real loss here is the abandonment of Bathsheba's narrative. Because while David fell, Bathsheba rose. She gave birth to four more sons, and when her first, Solomon, was of age David was on his deathbed. As David lay dying, his kingdom was in tumult. His oldest living son, Adonijah, was gathering followers and attempting to take the throne from the heir presumptive, Solomon. Nathan, knowing that Solomon was God's anointed, enlisted Bathsheba's help.

Bathsheba went to David and reminded him that he had once promised her that Solomon would rule as king. The scriptures say she made "obesance" to him and that in response he said, "As the Lord liveth, that hath redeemed my soul out of all distress, . . . Solomon thy son shall reign after me."⁸

This exchange happened many years after the initial suffering David had inflicted on Bathsheba. He sexually assaulted her, yes, but he also murdered her husband and brought her into his harem as one of his wives. In modern times, many women maintain relationships with their perpetrators, if only because of the familiar ties that first connected them. It is less common for a victim to be married to her perpetrator following the assault. Marrying Bathsheba was likely an act of mercy and restitution on David's part, since she would have been stoned otherwise, but that marriage would not have lessened the load of mental trauma she carried.

I cannot even imagine what that must have been like for Bathsheba. Being married to David must have meant that she was constantly,

8. 1 Kings 1:29–30.

cyclically re-traumatized and brought face-to-face over and over again with what could have so easily translated into a state of permanent, crippling victimhood.

And that's what makes the deathbed scene so amazing. Bathsheba had transformed. She must have to become the figure of influence this story shows her to be. Nathan, the prophet, depended on her during a crucial and dangerous time to sway the king. And David trusted her good judgment too. She could not have stepped into that exchange without having arrived at some sense of her own power, and some sense of forgiveness.

The ultimate product of Bathsheba's transformation was, as we discussed earlier, her being appointed Gebirah. Within the Song of Solomon, we see Solomon representing the bridegroom and the king. This king dies and is reborn, ultimately returning to his bride. This is familiar symbolism for Christians, especially for those who are familiar with the visionary bridegroom metaphor as it plays out in John the Beloved's revelations. The bridegroom, of course, represents Christ. The bride is traditionally associated with the Church, but it is always personified as female. So, for the sake of our conversation today, let's imagine the bride as a representation of each of us, as each woman who has been stripped of her uniquely feminine vestments and is searching for her power and her king.

And thou, O tower of the flock, the strong hold of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come, even the first dominion; the kingdom shall come to the daughter of Jerusalem. Now why dost thou cry out aloud? is there no king in thee? is thy counsellor perished? for pangs have taken thee as a woman in travail. Be in pain, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail: for now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and thou shalt dwell in the field, and thou shalt go even to Babylon; there shalt thou be delivered; there the Lord shall redeem thee.⁹

9. Micah 4:8–10.

The bride, referred to in those jubilant verses as the tower of the flock and the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, will be delivered. She will be brought forth out of Babylon, and the Lord shall redeem her. These are the exact themes you'll find preserved in the Song of Solomon.

So, I'd like to close with a question. If Solomon represents Christ, the bridegroom, who then does his mother, Bathsheba, represent?

Bathsheba typifies the great, loving, and wise Gebirah, doesn't she? The queen mother who sits at the right hand of her son, the bridegroom and king, the woman we sometimes call our Heavenly Mother or the Queen of Heaven. And if she could speak for a moment, break the silence there on her holy seat, I think she would offer us the promise of the Gebirah who speaks in Proverbs 31: "Who can find a powerful woman?" she repeats your question back to you. "Strength and honor are her clothing, and she *shall* rejoice in time to come."

AMBER RICHARDSON {richardson.amb@gmail.com} is a storyteller with credits in many mediums. She has produced a YouTube series, *Splitting the Sky*, and a podcast, *On Sovereign Wings*. She's performed in festivals and plays such as *Mother Wove the Morning* by Carol Lynn Pearson. The common thread running through her creative work is a desire to expand the female experience within a spiritual context. You can connect with her on Instagram @richardson.amb