Reconsidering Bathsheba's Story from an Asian Perspective*

Samuel Cheon**

I. Introduction

The story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 is one of the most tragic narratives in the Hebrew Bible. It describes how a king's lust drove him to destroy cruelly the family of a loyal soldier. Its characters, including David, Uriah, Bathsheba and Joab, were involved in this tragic event—an event which distorted their lives. For example, David, the king of all Israel, had been blessed and the recipient of promises through the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 7), but, for this incident, he angered God and as a consequence his house was involved in serious trouble (2 Sam 12.10). Though Uriah was very faithful to his king, his master killed him for this scandalous event. Bathsheba was the wife of a loyal soldier, but, because of this incident in which she became an object of the king's lust, was deprived of her loving husband and lost the unexpected child conceived through David, and was later part of the power struggle in the Davidic palace.

Joab, both Uriah's master and the captain of David's army, was not exceptional. He was forced by the order of his master to arrange matters so that his innocent soldier would be killed. Moreover, later he was deeply involved in the power struggle in the royal family, including the revolt of Absalom and the throne succession of Solomon, which the prophet Nathan considered to be the result of the tragic event in his oracle (2 Sam 12.10-12). Finally, David's captain was killed at the end of this struggle by the order of his master.

It means that, after this ruthless political performance, David and his kingdom were constantly faced with crises through the troubles of his family. That is, after destroying his official's family, David was involved in his own family trouble. It also means that, even though David repented of his sin after Nathan's blame (2 Samuel 12), the prophet's oracle was not completely nullified. In this respect, the tragic story can be considered as the pivotal turning point in the narrative plot of the books of Samuel as well as in the whole David story.[1]

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**Samuel Cheon is Professor of Old Testament and Dean of the Graduate School of Theological Interdisciplinary School at Hannam University, South Korea. He received his Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, USA and has published in the areas of Asian biblical interpretation, intertestamental literature, the history of biblical interpretation, and the relationship of science and religion, including *Understanding the Old Testament Apocrypha* (1996), *The Exodus Story in the Wisdom of Solomon* (1997), *Commentary on Genesis* (2001), *Dead Sea Scrolls and Qumran Community* (2004), and *Bible and Science* (2008). Email: Samuel@hnu.kr

[1] W. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 271; R. Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 249.

Though it presents one of the most crucial acts of King David, interpreters have often traditionally tried to reduce his sin, negatively describing Bathsheba as the object of his lust. For example, emphasizing David's piety and Bathsheba's beauty, Josephus retold the story in his *Jewish Antiquities* (7.1) as follows: "Now David…was by nature a righteous and god-fearing man, and one who strictly observed the laws of his fathers, nevertheless fell into grave error…She was very beautiful to look upon and surpassed all other women…He was captivated by the beauty of the woman…he was unable to restrain his desire…" Moreover, Josephus attributed David's evil motive for killing Uriah to Bathsheba's asking. "And when she became pregnant and sent to the king, asking him to contrive some way of concealing her sin—for, according to the laws of the fathers, she was deserving of death as an adulteress…"

Matthew Henry, the well-known biblical expositor of England in the 18th century, whose biblical commentaries were very influential upon Korean pastors, also added a negative view of Bathsheba. Commenting on 2 Sam 11.1-5, he portrayed David's lust has having been gratified by her consent. "…When she came he lay with her, she too easily consenting, because he was a great man, and famed for his goodness too. Surely (thinks she) that can be no sin which such a man as David is the mover of…" John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, also presented a similar view in his commentary, briefly indicating that David "took her—from her own house into his palace, not by force, but by persuasion." It implies that Bathsheba consented to lie with David.

The traditional view of Bathsheba has been continued by most of the recent interpreters of the story, including biblical scholars, painters, writers and filmmakers.[2] For example, suggesting a possible element of feminine flirtation, Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg maintained, "her consciousness of the danger into which adultery was leading her (Deut 22.22) must have been outweighed by her realization of the honour of having attracted the king."[3] George Nicol also argued that "Bathsheba's action in bathing so close to the king's residence was provocative, nor can the possibility that the provocation was deliberate be discounted."[4] Randall Bailey described the marriage of David and Bathsheba in the view of a political scheme, considering her as his co-conspirator.[5] He regarded it as a strategic union like David's other political marriages with women from influential families.[6] It means that Bathsheba was a willing and equal partner in the adultery. Similarly, Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan supposed, "The text seems to

[2] J. Cheryl Exum, "Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted," *Semeia* 74 (1996), 51.
[3] Hans W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel* (OTL: Philadelphia; Westminster, 1964), 310.
[4] G. G. Nicol, "Bathsheba, a Clever Woman?" *Expository Times* 99 (1988), 360.
[5] Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989).
[6] Concerning David's political marriages, refer to Jon D. Levenson and Baruch Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99/4 (1980): 507-518.

imply that Bathsheba asked to be 'sent for' and 'taken.'"[7]

These interpretations show a tendency to regard Bathsheba as "a *femme fatale* who deliberately plots to become David's wife"[8] or a co-conspirator in the event. However, Cheryl Exum questioned these conclusions as follows: "When commentators on 2 Samuel 11 suggest that Bathsheba shares the blame, are they picking up on a lament message in the text, or are they reading their own gender stereotypes back into it?"[9] It means that such interpretations reflected a male perspective. Analyzing the text, Moshe Garsiel argued that Bathsheba was a tragic figure involuntarily involved in the event, a view which could be supported by hints in the text and by the historical background.[10] Richard Davidson also concluded that Bathsheba was a victim of power rape on the part of David.[11] According to him, the account of Bathsheba had no reference to "women who seduce men and receive divine condemnation" or "to women who commit sexually immoral acts together with men and together are indicted by God."[12] Rather, power rape received "the strongest possible theological condemnation in this narrative."[13]

Unlike these recent interpretations, in which Bathsheba is regarded as an innocent victim or a willful schemer, others suggest that the text is ambiguous. It means that it is very difficult to decide whether she was a victim or a schemer. For example, according to Gale Yee, the "story of David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba…is one shrouded in ambiguity. The character of Bathsheba and her motivations are particularly puzzling. The author gives no clues to the emotions of a woman who commits adultery, becomes pregnant, loses her husband, and marries her royal lover."[14] Presenting both a "prosecutor's reading" and a "defendant's reading" of the narrative, H. C. Paul Kim and M. Fulgence Nyengete argue that it is not impossible to regard Bathsheba as both a willing participant and as an innocent victim in the adultery.[15] According to them, "the text's ambiguity causes readers…to ponder the possibility that she welcomed the opportunity to have the king's child and thus become a queen…However, from

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[7] Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Slingshots, Ships, and Persona; Psychosis: Murder, Sexual Intrigue, and Power in the Lives of David and Othello," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible* (Semeia Studies 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 59.

[8] R. H. van der Bergh, "Is Bathsheba Guilty?: The Septuagint's Perspective," *Journal for Semitics* 17/1 (2008): 182.

[9] Exum, 51.

[10] Moshe Garsiel, "The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993): 261-262.

[11] R. M. Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17/2 (2006/Autumn): 82.

[12] Davidson, 95.

[13] Davidson, 95.

[14] Gale A. Yee, "Bathsheba," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 627; also refer to her article, "Fraught with Background: Literary Ambiguity in II Samuel 11," *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 240-253.

[15] H. C. Paul Kim and M. Fulgence Nyengete, "Murder S/He Wrote? A Cultural and Psychological Reading of 2 Samuel 11-12," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible* (Semeia Studies 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003): 95-116.

the same perspective, a careful reader will emphasize with Bathsheba's fate of innocent suffering."[16] However, emphasizing the ambiguity of the ancient narrative, these interpreters tend to overlook the unexpressed voice and suffering of the powerless woman, and maintain the interpretations suggested by the male perspective.

As we saw above, three kinds of interpretations have been produced concerning the story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. They describe Bathsheba as a seducer, a victim, or an ambiguous person. Though, among the interpretations, the suggestion that Bathsheba was victimized is preferred, such a view should be more developed in an Asian cultural perspective. This article develops such a perspective of the story through a comparative study with similar stories in Asia.

II. Misunderstanding of the Story in Asia

As we saw above, the figure of Bathsheba has been negatively interpreted up to recently in Europe and North America. Such a negative view of her has also developed in Asia from a cultural bias. First of all, her behavior of bathing in a place where someone could see her (2 Sam 11.2) is censured. For example, Jongsoo Park argues that Bathsheba's bathing in this manner cannot be understood by any possibility in the Korean sentiment and her chastity should be doubted.[17] He also indicates that, when her husband was at war, she would have to suppress such improper behavior by herself. It implies that she did not conduct herself well. This interpretation reflects the Korean traditional sentiment, in which a woman is first censured in any incident of rape and something in her behavior is considered as provocative. It is a typical male perspective in the ancient Confucian society, by which man's responsibility for sexual suppression is not seriously considered.

Secondly, Bathsheba is censured because she did not commit suicide after the tragic event. According to the Korean traditional custom, which reflects the Confucian ideology, a married woman should kill herself after being raped in order to prove her innocence and chastity. If not, she would be under suspicion of having committed adultery. Such distrust could result in her death. This perspective implies that because Bathsheba did not try to kill herself she should be seen as an adulterous woman. However, it is not proper to apply this view to the biblical story because this incident reflects ancient Israelite culture which did not require a woman's death after being raped. For example, when Absalom raped David's concubines, they did not try to kill themselves and David did not require their death, although they were isolated (2 Sam 16.20-22; 20.3; Cf. 2 Sam 3.7-10). Comparatively speaking, both Confucian society and the Yahwistic community required the innocence of a married woman, but, when she was raped, she was

[16] Kim and Nyengete, 115-116.
[17] Park Jongsoo, *Hebrew Narrative: Trans-cultural Understanding of the Bible in the Korean Context* (Seoul: The Wisdom Ground Press, 1995), 113 (in Korean).

treated differently according to their cultural ideologies. That is, the former required her death, whereas the latter did not demand such extreme behavior.

Thirdly, there is doubt as to whether Bathsheba intended to become David's queen through producing his son. Especially, her declaration "I am pregnant" (2 Sam 11.5) is misunderstood as her intention to become the queen. Of course, as Kim and Nyengele indicated, "…in the ancient Korean society, for a woman to have a royal child meant a great deal of fortune. Even a maidservant in the palace might be picked by the king…and once she became pregnant with the king's child, especially a son, her status would virtually rise to second next to the queen."[18] However, as they mentioned, this view was applicable to only young unmarried girls in ancient Confucian society. A king's scandal with a married woman was condemned in the ancient Asian society even before the prevailing of Confucianism, as we will see below in the ancient Asian narratives. Moreover, Confucianism prohibited such immoral relationships in a very strict way and required the king to be a model for a life of ideological morality. It means that, in the ancient cultural context of Asia, especially in the Confucian atmosphere, it is impossible to suppose that Bathsheba as a married woman would tempt the king and have a sexual relationship with him for producing a son with the intention of becoming his queen.

Unlike the case of Bathsheba, unfortunately, David is positively interpreted in the perspective of Asian fatalism, according to which his sinful act is considered as a part of his uncontrollable fate. Combining this with the doctrine of providence, this fatalism is accepted among Asian Christians without any criticism. A similar view can be found in a Jewish legend in which the destiny of David and Bathsheba is emphasized as follows: "By nature he was not disposed to commit such evil-doing as his relation to Bathsheba involved. God himself brought him to this crime…Moreover, from the first, Bathsheba had been destined by God for David…"[19] The problem of this interpretation is not only to nullify the unjust behavior of David, but also to disregard the suffering of Bathsheba and the innocent death of Uriah. That is, the powerful king's responsibility is not questioned, for whom the powerless husband and wife become scapegoats. Consequently, this view of fatalism produces an immoral interpretation of the tragic story.

On the other hand, Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, the other powerless one, is also overlooked in Asia, as in North America.[20] When people read or think about the story in 2 Samuel 11, they hardly focus on the faithful soldier and his death, but mostly on David and

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[18] Kim and Nyengele, 101.

[19] Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 546.

[20] Concerning the misunderstanding of Uriah in North America, refer to Uriah (Yong-Hwan) Kim, "Uriah the Hittite: A (Con)Text of Struggle for Identity," in *The Bible in Asian America* (Semeia 90-91; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 69-85. According to Kim, "Although Uriah is not depicted in the Bible as an evil person (in fact, he was a good man), in order to save David's face and to ameliorate his crime, some readers tend to give Uriah bad press…the rabbis branded Uriah as a rebel" (81).

Bathsheba. Moreover, he is considered even as an offender against the king's order, and not as a keeper of the traditional rule and a protestor against his master's unlawful demand. Consequently, his death is regarded as the result of his disobedience to the king's command rather than as a protest against his master's unlawful conduct. This interpretation reflects just the perspective of the ruling class or the majority group, paying no attention to the viewpoint of minority groups, especially foreigners. As in most countries of the world, the powerless foreigners were disregarded, as also in the ancient traditional society of Asia. However, this kind of reading produces an unreasonable interpretation of the story, justifying the evil king's improper demand and blaming the upright soldier's faithfulness.

III. Parallel Stories in Asia

Now, for our comparative studies, it is time to see parallel or similar narratives with the story of Bathsheba in Asia, including the folktale of Domi and the story of Hanbing. These similar narratives are considered as a story type of a powerful authority taking a woman away from a powerless man. Their typical outline is that, lusting after a beautiful married woman, an authority tries to deprive her forcefully of a powerless man, but he fails to do so because of her resistance.

For example, *History of the Three Countries* (*Sam-guk-sa-ki,* in Korean), which was written by Kim Busik in Korea in 1145, presents the folktale of Domi. According to this narrative from almost 2000 years ago, Domi belonged to the lower class, but he was righteous and trustworthy. His wife was very beautiful and chaste. Hearing about this man and his wife, the king wanted to test whether she really was chaste. He called Domi and said to him that, though the wife had the virtue of chastity she would not keep this if she was persuaded with good sayings in a quiet and dark place. But Domi answered the king, "People's love is uncountable. My wife will keep her virtue of chastity to the last day of her life." When Domi was in the palace, the king sent to Domi's house his retainer who disguised himself as the king. The disguised king said to her, "I beat your husband in a chess game gambling for you and now you belong to me. Tomorrow I will take you into my palace and you will be a court lady." With these words, he tried to rape her, but she said to him, "…Please enter into the room, first. I will follow you after changing my dress." When he was waiting for her, however, she made a female slave disguise herself like her, and the slave served him instead of her.

When the king heard of her playing this trick, he was very angry and blinded Domi, putting him in a small boat and letting it go in a river. In addition, he forcefully brought Domi's wife into his palace and tried to rape her. However, she said to him, "I know I cannot live alone after losing my husband…Now, how can I disobey the king's command? Yet I am dirty because I am

in menstruation. After waiting for a while and bathing clearly, I will return to you." When the king permitted her to do so, Domi's wife immediately escaped to a bank of the river. However, looking up at the heavens, she cried out, because she could not cross the river without a boat. At that time, suddenly a small boat came to her and she took it and arrived at an island, where she met Domi…They went to the country of Goguryeo by a boat and lived together there.

This story reflects the immorality prevailing in the ruling class and the social conflict between the ruler and the ruled. It also reflects the Confucian thought that requires a woman's chastity and faithfulness to her husband.[21] It gives the audience instructions concerning the woman's virtue of chastity, the love of a married couple, and the wisdom and courage of the lower class against the oppression of the ruling class. It especially indicates that the married woman's chastity is more important and valuable than loyalty to the king. Similar versions are found in ancient documents and oral traditions in the Korean peninsula.

Its parallel stories are also found in China, especially in the narrative of Hanbing, which is included in the ancient Chinese book of *Susinki* and which reflects a woman's strong resistance to the king's immorality. According to the narrative from almost 2500 years ago, Hanbing, a minor official, took a beautiful woman as his wife. Her beauty was very famous in the capital of China. However, the king forcefully took her and sentenced her innocent husband to forced labor in a prison on the border. Tragically, missing his wife and suffering from the hard labor, Hanbing killed himself. Hearing of her husband's death, his wife also killed herself, jumping down from a tower. Hanbing's wife left a testament, according to which she wished to be buried with her husband. Although he was angry, the king let her body be buried near her husband's tomb. A tree consequently grew from each of the tombs of Hanbing and his wife. Soon the trees became big with entangled branches and roots, and provided a place from which a pair of mandarin ducks sadly cried out.

This story was produced in the context of such social unrest as continued war, in which ordinary people and their families lived in a very difficult political and economic situation. Like the folktale of Domi, it reflects not only the king's immorality and the conflict between the ruler and the ruled, but also gives the audience some instructions, including the value of the woman's chastity and the love of the couple. But the immorality of the king in this story is more serious than in the folktale of Domi because Hanbing belongs to the class of officials, unlike Domi from the lower class. That is, the king's tyranny can be evaluated to be more cruel in the story of Hanbing than in Domi's, because it affected even a member of the ruling class. Nevertheless, among Asians, each king in these stories has been considered as one of the most notorious kings, and each victim as one of the righteous. On the other hand, countries ruled by such kings have

[21] Chung Ku-bok, *New Interpretation on Samguksagi* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2004), 146 (in Korean).

been regarded as societies without justice or peace.

Whatever the backgrounds and purposes of these stories, they have common motifs with the story of Bathsheba as follows: (1) Each story introduces a beautiful married woman; (2) The king strongly lusted for her; (3) Each of their husbands was good and sincere; (4) It is implied that the king's lust should be blamed; (5) A married woman's chastity is considered a very important virtue in society; (6) The king tried to kill an innocent husband; (7) The king unfortunately destroyed the family in consequence. In spite of these similarities, one of the big differences is that, though the Asian stories present the woman's resistance against the king's lust, the biblical narrative does not overtly show such an idea.

IV. Understanding of the Story in Asia

1. The Narrative Type

The story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 is placed in the first part of the "Court Narrative" which consists of 2 Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2.[22] Other stories about her are presented in the last part of the literary unit. Accordingly, Bathsheba with Solomon and Nathan forms an *inclusio* within the narrative framework (2 Samuel 11-12; 1 Kings 1-2). Within this literary context the story in 2 Samuel 11 seems to be presented as the introduction into the Davidic court of Bathsheba as the mother of David's future successor Solomon.

On the other hand, Bathsheba's story in 2 Samuel 11 is set within the account of the Ammonite war in 2 Samuel 10-12. Within this war account, the conflict between Ammon and Israel in 2 Sam 10.1-11.1 becomes the beginning of the story, whereas the conquest report of Rabbah in 2 Sam 12.26-31 becomes the finish. It means that the private and domestic story of Bathsheba is framed by the public story of war and conquest.[23] The tragic story of the powerless husband and wife is surrounded by the story of victory in the international battle. However, the substance of the tragic event that the story describes—the king taking his soldier's wife—can be overlooked within this literary context.

In the perspective of the comparative study with its similar Asian narratives the story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11, by itself, belongs to the narrative type of an authority taking a woman away from a powerless man. Though the story consists of a part of the Davidic court

[22] H. O. Forshey, "Court Narrative (2 Samuel 9-1 Kings 2)," *ABD*, Vol. 1, 1178. Leonhard Rost designated the chapters as "Succession Narrative" in his book, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926), trans. By M. D. Rutter and D. M. Gunn as, *The Succession to the Throne of David* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982). However, recent scholarship prefers "Court Narrative" to Rost's designation, because they include more complex materials, though it is also unsatisfactory.

[23] David M. Gunn, "2 Samuel," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed., James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 293.

narrative, it is basically fitted into such a narrative type. Considering the Asian context, such a story or event related to this narrative type was usually produced in the ruling period of a wicked king, under whom his country seriously declined or even collapsed. For example, Kang, the king in the story of Hanbing, was a tyrant and his country was destroyed in his reign. If we regard the king as the representative of his country, it can be supposed that immorality would prevail in the society he ruled. That is, stories connected with such narrative types do not only reveal the immorality and debauchery of the king, but also the injustice and corruption in his kingdom.

The story of David's forcible taking of Bathsheba should also be considered in this view. Its following stories, including rape, revenge, killing, rebellion, power struggle, disaster, and national division, not only show the social injustice and immorality in his kingdom, but also its decline and unrest. In spite of the narrator's mention of David's repentance in 2 Samuel 12, this story was used to present the crucial reason for his kingdom's unrest, embossing David's misbehavior, by which he hardly maintained his dignity as father and his leadership as king. That is, the story was presented as the decisive case that became the turning point of David's kingdom as well as his life.

The stories related to such narrative types reflect the suffering of the powerless people. So they were mainly circulated among the socially weak people, who tried to keep the virtues of chastity and conjugal affection within their families against the violence of the ruling class. Telling such stories, those people expressed their resistance and protest against the immoral authority. Though the ruling class attempted to hide such stories and to prohibit their circulation, the powerless rather tried to deliver them into the wider world to openly demonstrate against the wickedness of the king in his kingdom. Considered in this perspective, it is certain that the story of Bathsheba would also have been circulated and preserved among the powerless people of Israel in order to protest against the evilness of King David and his party.[24] Telling this story, the powerless in Israel would overtly protest and prosecute against the evilness of the ruling class, including the king. The storyteller, who was the collector of such circulated stories, delivers us the voice of the powerless: "But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of Yahweh" (2 Sam 11.27). As the prophets spoke for the powerless, the narrator, reflecting the thinking of the weak, judged David's behavior as evil.

2. The Voiceless Woman

[24] According to McCarter, "The circumstances must have stirred public suspicion at the time, so that the interpretation of the events that our prophetic narrator received from his tradition may ultimately derive from circles contemporary with and hostile to David." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 291.

In the story of 2 Samuel 11, Bathsheba was voiceless until she was pregnant. As she was described as the object of David's lust in verses 2-4, she is presented as a passive woman with a series of verbs that were used for David's initiative: "and he saw…sent…inquired…sent…took her…lay with her…" Here the narrator does not introduce any of her voice or emotion. The following biblical stories related to her do not even imply any hint about her feeling and perspective on this event. Considered in the Asian culture, this voiceless Bathsheba in verses 2-4 should be regarded as a victim of David's evil behavior rather than a co-conspirator in adultery, because it was natural for a married woman to keep her chastity in any situation; as was also respected in ancient Israel according to Deuteronomy 22.22. That is, the voicelessness of Bathsheba that the narrator describes should be interpreted as meaning not only that she was very weak and forcibly victimized, but also her reaction was completely disregarded. On the contrary, David's action that the narrator describes should be understood as saying that he was very strong and dominant in this event and as the one who took the initiative.

Bathsheba briefly mentioned in the story of 2 Samuel 11, "I am pregnant!" She did not hide the pregnancy, but revealed a perplexing situation. Yet she did not publicly spread such a thing, but secretly reported it to the king through an intermediary. It seems to me that, within its literary context, this brief message, which is a turning point of the story, indicated that she is prosecuting the king himself for his misbehavior rather than expressing her pleasure at being pregnant with his child. She did not need a lengthy explanation for this prosecution because the king as its judge already knew the reason for her pregnancy. David's attempt to hide his misconduct in the following content shows that her brief report is the exposure of the king's immorality. On the other hand, considering this in an Asian culture, Bathsheba's secret reporting to the king could be thought of as an expression of a social virtue, according to which a person, especially a woman, should not produce hearsay for the other's misfortune. It implies that the narrator would have no intention of censuring Bathsheba in his storytelling.

According to the story, Bathsheba became David's wife after Uriah's death. Yet actually the king one-sidedly took her as one of his wives. Is it possible for Bathsheba as a widow to become the king's wife in the traditional perspective of Asia? It is not impossible. In the strict Confucian society of Asia, especially in the Chosun Dynasty of Korea, an upper class widow was not permitted to marry. She had to live alone until her death for the sake of her dead husband and his noble family. Moreover, as such ideology became more strictly applied, a widow was even required to kill herself following her husband's death. However, before such Confucian thought became dominant in Korean society, a widow was allowed to remarry after a period.

For example, according to the story of Dohwa and Bihyung in the book of *Sam-guk-yu-sa* written by the Buddhist monk Ilyun in about 1281, it was possible for a widow to lie with the king after her husband's death. To briefly summarize this interesting story; a wicked king tried

to take a beautiful married woman named Dohwa, but she said to him, “The thing a woman should keep is that she does not have to serve two men. It is not permitted for a married woman to leave her husband and marry another man, even by the authority and will of the heavenly king.” The king asked, “What if I kill you?” She answered, “I will never want to do so, even if I die.” The king asked again in a mocking tone, “Is it possible to do so if you do not have a husband of your own?” She said, “I think so.” Fortunately, the king released her. The wicked king was dethroned and died that year. Two years later, her husband also died. One night the dead king, maybe his ghost, visited her and entered her room, and said to her, “Did you say that it would be possible if you had no husband?” She hesitated and asked her parents, who let her lie with him. The king stayed seven days in her house and later she had a baby boy named Bihyung, who became the master of the ghosts.

Confucianism was not dominant in the society that produced this ancient Korean story. So the idea of the widow’s marriage with the king’s ghost was possible. It shows that the idea of a widow’s marriage depended on the social ideology prevailing in the country at that time. If we consider that the ancient Israelite culture also permitted the widow’s marriage then Bathsheba’s marriage with David after Uriah’s death cannot be considered an improper one.

Though David married Bathsheba, this marriage unfortunately brought about the exposure of the event that he wanted to hide. Further, his naming Solomon as successor caused the continuous circulation of the story among the people, especially the powerless, who remembered him and his successor. Retelling the narrative concerning the king and his successor, they continued to remember the tragic family of Bathsheba and Uriah, and its destruction. Consequently, Bathsheba’s marriage with David made the people remember her first husband’s tragic death and her second husband’s wicked behavior.

3. The Innocent Man

Uriah was one of the warriors in David’s elite force that was named “The Thirty” (2 Sam 23.39; 1 Chr 11.41). Though he was known as “Uriah the Hittite” in the story of 2 Sam 11, the designation of him does not necessarily mean that he was a foreigner who was born outside Israel. It is possible that his ancestor came from one of the Neo-Hittite states in northern Syria and their descendants continued to stay in Palestine after the collapse of the empire.[25]

The story reveals Uriah’s virtues, which are contrasted with David’s vices. As Asian stories of the king taking a married woman from the powerless man show, the immorality of the wicked king is contrasted with the virtue of the victimized people. Rhetorically, this description not only enhances the vice of the king, but also the virtue of the victim.

[25] Robert Althann, “Uriah,” in *ABD*, Vol. VI, 768.

The virtues which belong to Uriah are common in many old cultures, including those of ancient Israel and Asia. First, Uriah was brave. He belonged to the elite force, and he was placed at the front line of the war against the Ammonites, where he bravely fought without any suspicion. Finally he died in the battlefield. However, David cowardly and unmanly tried to hide his sin, and cunningly used Joab in his crime of killing an innocent soldier. Second, Uriah was faithful. He obeyed the right orders of the king, but rejected his master's improper command. That is, though David commanded Uriah to go to his home, Uriah did not accept the king's order. According to the Asian context, Uriah's action can be considered as his faithfulness to the king, because a faithful retainer should not obey a king's improper order, even if he would be killed. On the contrary, David's command and adultery show that he was unfaithful to his soldiers, because he ordered this unjust conspiracy. Third, Uriah had the virtue of continence. Even though the king asked him to stay with his wife in his house, he refused to violate the traditional custom (1 Sam 21.4-5). His continence is contrasted with David's adultery during the war.

Considered in the Asian context, Uriah is completely innocent. He was victimized without any sin, though he wanted to keep the social virtues and morality. He was killed like Abel in Gen 4.1-16 and Naboth in 2 Kings 21. Uriah's innocent death raises a question of theodicy. Though the following stories of 2 Samuel 11 show God's punishment of David and his house for his immorality, they are never concerned about the Lord's compensation for Uriah's innocent death. Though the killer's kingdom continued, the victim's family never recovered.

In this unjust social situation in Israel, Uriah was remembered among the powerless, as the stories of such victimized people have been continuously retold in Asia. Through retelling his story, they remembered his virtues, innocent death, his wife's unfortunate life, and the destruction of his family. Through it, they also remembered the suffering of the people victimized by the king and his party. In addition, they protested against such violating power and authority through this remembering of the innocent man. This would be the way of life and survival that the powerless developed in the social context of being victimized by the king. In this respect, the innocent man is still waiting for God's compensation, staying in the memory of the powerless.

V. Conclusion

The comparative study between the story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 and its similar folktales in Asia provides fruitful insights for understanding the biblical text and correcting its misunderstanding. It leads us to understand the biblical story in the perspective of the powerless who made and retold such folktales in the situation in which social injustice prevailed from the

ruling class's misuse of its power. According to this comparative study, the biblical story belongs to the narrative type of the king taking a married woman from the powerless, in which the king is considered as the wicked, and his victims as the just. That is, Bathsheba and her husband Uriah should be regarded as the victimized. Further, as such folktales in Asia are considered as a reflection of immorality in the kingdom as well as of the king himself, the biblical story should be regarded in this view. That is, it reflects the injustice and immorality of David in his kingdom, as the stories which follow it show. It means that it should be regarded as a pivotal story within the "Court Narrative" rather than a piece of gossip which simply deals with his private adultery.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 from an Asian perspective. To do so, it attempts a comparative study between the biblical story and similar folktales in Asia, including the folktale of Domi and the narrative of Hanbing, after reviewing three interpretations of the story, according to which Bathsheba is considered as a victim, a seducer, or an ambiguous person. Criticizing the other two interpretations, it develops the perspective that she was the victim of the king's adultery. This comparative study makes us understand the biblical story from the perspective of the powerless who produced and retold such folktales in the situation in which social injustice caused by the king's misuse of power was prevalent.

It is argued that Bathsheba's story itself belongs to the narrative type of the king taking a married woman from a powerless man, in which the king is considered as wicked, whereas the victim is just. That is, David is described as an immoral king, whereas Bathsheba and Uriah are presented as being just. As such Asian narratives are considered as a reflection of the immorality and injustice of the king and his society, the biblical story can be also considered as an implication of David's wickedness and his kingdom's immorality, as its following narratives show. In this regard, it is not simply gossip dealing with the king's private adultery, but a pivotal story within the "Court Narrative," which reveals the injustice of the king and his kingdom.

Keyword: David, Bathsheba, Uriah, Domi, Hanbing, and Court Narrative.