



Review article

BOOK REVIEW: KOENIG, SARA. *BATHSHEBA SURVIVES. STUDIES ON PERSONALITIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT*. COLUMBIA: UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS, 2018.

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Bathsheba has survived, claims Sara Koenig, not despite the gaps on the biblical text or the diverse interpretations of her, but because of them. *Bathsheba Survives* is a succinct yet substantial work which stands at the crossroads between the trajectory of the author and the series where the book itself is published. In one hand, this is not the first study of Bathsheba done by Koenig (2011), who previously published her PhD dissertation under the title *Isn't This Bathsheba? A Study in Characterization*. Back there, the author contrasted the portraits of Bathsheba in the Masoretic text, the Talmud and the Midrash to deepen in the elucidation of this minor and elusive figure. Somehow, *Bathsheba Survives* follows the path opened by its predecessor, with greater focus on biblical reception rather than individual characterization. Also, in her new book, Koenig goes further in time, including the interpretations made during the Patristic era, the Middle ages, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and even the Contemporary times. The author (Koenig 2018) is quite interested in following minor female figures from the Old Testament, such as Tamar, Bathsheba and Susan, who allow Koenig to discuss how sexuality and gender is represented in the Scriptures. On the other hand, *Bathsheba Survives* is the last volume in the Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament Series, a book closely linked with the analysis of David and Solomon posed by Marty Steussy (2009) and Walter Brueggemann (2005) respectively. Nevertheless, Koenig takes a different approach, avoiding the over-emphasis of topics such as authority, power and politics, taking instead a journey through history, theological questions, womanhood, iconography, ancient and modern scholarship, literary criticism and even popular culture. This work surely accomplishes what the series editor James Greenshaw (2018) was looking for when he stated "perhaps the primary significance of biblical personages is the light they throw on the imagining of deity (p. ix)".

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The little appearance Bathsheba has in the Scriptures has led to a whole spectrum of interpretations, going from the suggestion that she is victim of rape to the straight denounce of her seductive intentions. It is needed an active reading to fill the gaps on the biblical text, which allows Bathsheba to survive through time with several diachronic meanings. Koenig pays special attention to the context in which the text was produced, as well as the background of each further interpreter. This way, she can take the double task proposed by the aesthetic of reception, which is understand the culture via the text and vice versa. The author follows the deleuzian approach of Breed (2014), who insist on how many possible meanings remain virtual – e.g. potential – within the text; some meanings are actualized thanks to certain readings, while some others must remain latent until a future interpreter shed new light over the text. Despite not being univocal, this methodology is appropriate for a character so elusive like Bathsheba. Koenig starts (chapter 1), precisely, identifying the several gaps in the story: why is not David at the battlefield? Did he spied Bathsheba while she was bathing? Was Bathsheba aware David was looking at her? Was their sexual encounter consensual? Did Bathsheba love Uriah? Was she part of the plot against him? What was the gravest sin: adultery or murder? Who showed penance: only David or also Bathsheba? How to understand the punishment and further forgiveness of God? What was the role of Bathsheba in the strife over succession? Is there a conspiracy between Nathan and Bathsheba to assure the crowning of Solomon? Why did she asked Solomon to give Abishag to her brother Adonijah? As the author masterfully demonstrates, depending on how this questions are answered, there can arise many theological questions, doctrinal considerations and even political implications.

Koenig begins the historical journey revisiting the rabbinic literature (chapter 2), that dialogue between many editors and commentators contained in the Talmud and the Midrash. Despite their differences, interpreters had a consensual conception of the biblical text as cryptic (meaning is not literal), relevant (for present time), harmonic (between passages there cannot be contradictions) and divinely inspired. The main debate is whether David actually committed a sin or not. In one hand, some scholars suggest God put David on trial, like He did with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob before, but David failed. Others commentators state David was tempted by the Devil with a transitory yet overpowering lust. In the other hand, many exegetes point out at Nathan's parable and the death of David and Bathsheba's first



child as indicators of sin. In short, if David had not sinned, then God would have not punished him. However, Bathsheba is eclipsed by this debate with the notorious exception of Abarbanel, who deepens on the character's motivations and emotions. He claims Bathsheba was so affected by the death of her child, that she made David swear upon succession before getting pregnant from him again. Under this interpretation, there is no political conspiracy with Nathan, just a mother worried about the future of his son, Solomon. The author concludes that Bathsheba is regarded, despite her lack of leadership in the text, as a well-intended and wise woman in the rabbinic tradition.

Moving to the patristic era (chapter 3), Bathsheba is considered less of a character and more a kind of symbol or type for both virtue and sin. The main concern of the church fathers was to interpret this story from a Christological perspective. If the David is seen as a type of Christ, then Bathsheba, as his wife, would be a type of the Christian Church. But how to harmonize this typology with the actual text, where David committed adultery and then murder? In this period of time, allegories were the best resource for interpreters to reconcile many troubling passages in the Old Testament. For instance, Ambrose of Milan took for granted Bathsheba's nudity and seductive intentions to warn Christians about the danger of women, while Isidore of Seville gave a counter-intuitive philological interpretation that indicated that David's taking of Bathsheba from Uriah should be read as Christ taking the Law from the Jewish people and making it universal. Somehow, a similar idea can be found in the way Augustine understood the appearance of Bathsheba in the genealogy of Jesus in the gospels. Later on, during the middle ages (chapter 4), the exegesis took a more iconographic approach and less textual. The ambivalent conception of Bathsheba remained through this period, with some images portraying her as a seductress, while others represent her as a repenting woman. In the first case, the main focus was the bathing scene, which had a powerful symbolism: it could be a metaphor for purification and baptism, as well as a sign of seduction and voyeurism. In the second case, as can be seen in the Book of Hours and medieval psalters, Bathsheba was linked to Nathan's parable, the penance over the death of her child and, lastly, the Psalm 51.

This trend took a peculiar shift during reformation (chapter 5), where allegories and symbolism were less prominent. Instead of being an anticipatory type of the Christ, David is



seen as representing the sinful humanity as a whole. Even the most powerful can fall, but achieve absolution as well. Luther had a less controversial attitude towards sex and stated that adultery is caused by natural human weakness, not Devil's temptation. Also, he traced Bathsheba etymology 'daughter of quiet' to illustrate how vices proliferate in peaceful and luxury times. Calvin's sermons, on the other side, emphasized Bathsheba as equally guilty of the adultery sin and condemned her for showing a pure formal and hypocrite grief over Uriah's death. But, at the same time, Calvin was the first one in claiming that Bathsheba was a recipient of the mercy of God, not only David. The reformation period gave birth to more liberal interpretations, standing out the reading of Arcangela Taraboltti, venetian nun and the first female commentator of Bathsheba. She was the first of explicitly denounce the asymmetry of power between the great King David and the overwhelmed wife of Uriah. Passing to the Enlightenment (chapter 6), biblical reception and religion studies started to use historical and contextual methods instead of purely faith-based readings of the Scriptures. There was some consensus about the guilt of both David and Bathsheba regarding adultery, the covering-up of the pregnancy and the quick re-marrying after the death of Uriah. Also, interpreters noted that the punishment of God was only the death of their son, but David was not forced to divorce Bathsheba. Even further, she is vindicated from her past sins giving birth to Solomon and becoming a teacher-mother for the future king. By studying Eastern customs and following the political role of Bathsheba, Enlightenment interpreters highlighted her influence over royal affairs, giving her a more complex characterization.

At this point, the reader might notice that Koenig is advancing in two parallel lines: following Bathsheba characterization through time and discussing how Scripture exegesis has evolved. The local, minor and obscure figure of Bathsheba serves for a general deliberation of how biblical reception is a versatile field of studies, intimately linked with other cultural and academic spheres. The author manages to proceed with these two levels of thought along the book, without ever losing sight the concreteness of Bathsheba nor the abstractness of interpretation itself. In a prior interview, Koenig (2015) stated she felt biblical scholars were a little behind regarding other disciplines' methodologies – such as Continental philosophy or Literary criticism. With that in mind, the author arrives to the final part of the book (chapter 7) deploying a quite interesting analysis of cultural resonances and intertextuality around Bathsheba in the contemporary times. This figure has been portrayed in different art



expression, with a less faith-based approach and a greater cultural scope. Christian fiction books stress the romance – sometimes even a love triangle – between David, Bathsheba and Uriah. Popular songs¹, such like ‘Mad about you’ by Sting or ‘Dead’ by The Pixies, point out the conflictive nature of David’s lust and Uriah’s death. In film, there is a curious parallel between the half-naked dance of David in 2 Sam 6:14 and Bathsheba bathing in 2 Sam 11:2. In general terms, these contemporary interpretations of the story are less sympathetic to David and tend to recognize the political agency of Bathsheba. Finally, Koenig stated that Bathsheba might be understood through Bakhtin’s notion of ‘unfinalizability’, because she resists any complete characterization. What will be the future interpretations of this enigmatic figure? Koenig closes her book claiming that, despite the morally complexities of the story, Bathsheba should not be seen neither as a victimizer nor a victim, “but [as] a proud survivor (p.118)”.

Bathsheba survives is a wonderful written book. Both outsiders from the biblical studies field and experts will enjoy this journey. Each chapter opens up a whole world of ideas and broad questions that enrich both intellectual and faith experience. In the introduction, the author clarifies she restrained her investigation to Jewish and Christian traditions, being aware Bathsheba also appears in some African and Islamic interpretations. Maybe someday in the future she can publish about these topics as well. Hopefully, giving more space for her own voice as author and, why not, contemporary interpreter of Bathsheba.

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¹ It is unexpected to find these pop songs along the reverential tradition of the Midrash, the patristic exegesis or the reformists. However, Koenig is willing to go beyond the stretch walls of biblical studies and dialogue with other cultural expressions, like she already essayed in her analysis of the Irish band U2 (Keuss & Koenig 2011) and the musical polyphony contained in the Book of Psalms (Koenig 2005).



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