

“How the grammar of religion effects human relationships”

*Sermon on August 31st: Transforming Religion: European Conference on Philosophy of Religion, 28th-31st of August 2014, Muenster, Germany
Worship at Dominikanerkirche Münster*

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Scripture Reading (according to the assigned reading for Sunday, Aug 31st)

2 Samuel 12

¹ And the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. ² The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds:

³ But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.

⁴ And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but

took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.

⁵ And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, *As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die:* ⁶ And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.

⁷ And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;

⁸ And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.

⁹ Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. ¹⁰ Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife.

¹¹ Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives

before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun.

¹² For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.

¹³ And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. ¹⁴ Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die. ¹⁵ And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick.

The peace of the Lord be with you!

A mighty political leader ignores standards of justice, abuses his power, kills loyal subjects, and gets what he desires. And a prophet, a person of faith, to call upon the king to confront him with his wrongdoings. A storyline that has been of irritating timeliness for 3 millennia. The only thing that is exceptional in the biblical narrative is the willingness of the king to repent and correct his evil ways. A religious leader who's daring call for political justice is not only allowed and welcome, but affects political leaders and reminds them that their personal and public behavior are inseparable. It seems like a tale from a world long lost when Religion was good for society and played a positive role in the public space, instead of being blamed for wars, injustice, and illiberal sentiments. The lesson sounds like a vision for public theology or, rather, a souvenir from the past.

Although the European Conference on Philosophy of Religion has lectures on topics close to the theme presented in the lesson, I would like to turn your attention to the private realm touched, keeping in mind that the invention of the private realm is a rather modern idea.

Of course, there is a story behind the lesson from the second book of Samuel. All of you are familiar with the events that lead to Nathan's parable, and most of you are familiar with what happened afterwards.

Nevertheless, let me remind you exactly of the circumstances. While many comments on this lesson focus on the fact that the evil ways of king David are result from David's godlessness and – in the end – are a sin against God, they tend to forget the human factor: reasons and effects the story has on human relations.

It sounds like a modern TV-serie, like a season from US-series "house of cards", games in the realm of politics, power, and sex. Intrigue and scandal. The story, however, is solely being told from the male point of view. Even the glances, the looks are male; but the lesson we can learn, is an awareness, how our most private look at the world is influenced by structures of politics and power. What happens in the parable Nathan gives, is a change in perspective that affects the way David behaves.

Batseba is the wife of Uriah. But is Uriah anything of a husband? All that we know is that he rather spent time with his soldier friends, instead of taking time out to be

with his wife. Even when he has spare time and a good chance to go home and be with Batseba, he prefers to stay in the world of warriors. Manly duties and virtues in times of war and international conflict are essentially duties and virtues of soldiers. They exclude any private emotion or need. Bravery is bravery in the world of weapons and warfare.

King David, although responsible for all things military, leads a different life. His eyes catch a glimpse of Batseba's naked body while she takes a bath. Centuries of painters have spent square miles of canvas extending David's indiscreet glance. While David's glance is male and sexualized, his action is that of a warlord. He focuses on his prey and kills everyone that could keep the prey from him. While painters want to make us believe it is a story of seduction, romance and emotion, it is essentially a story of violence and brutality. We never learn about Batseba's part? To be honest, I doubt that the writers of the story were interested in Batseba at all. In a world obsessed by violence, even private stories are narrated making use of the grammatics of war. Wanting, taking, possessing, killing.

Batseba is summoned to David's palace. He takes her, she gets pregnant. Her husband is being killed, and she grieves. Actually, this is the only little piece of action that show Batseba as active, as doing something, not being the object of others. Batseba stays in her own home, performs the rites and rituals of grief, all left to herself. Then David, again makes her his wife, one among many wives, as we know. Batseba, again, is the object of things happening around her. It is a man's world.

Along come Nathan. His narrative is in essence a change in perspective. It is new and different kind of grammar that opens David's eyes. Nathan's rhetoric does not make use of any kind of religion, yet his parable does not follow the grammar of violence and power. Just to give an example: Nathan could have described the relationship between the poor man and the little lamb in legal terms as formal ownership. Or in business terms as investment and profit. Rather, Nathan, puts his words in affectionate terms of familial emotion. The poor man had a lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.

David's rage against the rich man's behavior is not the result his insights in legal and economic injustice, but rather the result of a different grammar. He rather feels the injustice done, more than he understands it. But his rage is that of a ruler. Kill the man. And he even turns to religion to justify his order: As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die.

It is not Nathan who first turns to religious law. He calls upon David with the famous one-liner, "Thou art the man"! David repents. David is forgiven and allowed to live. But then, the horrible thing happens. God takes the child's life. David and Batseba only child gets severely ill, and dies a few days later. Now it is God, who demands a sacrifice; it seems like punishing innocents for the misdemeanor of the rulers. Again, we are very familiar with this – it is human experience until our present times that civilians suffer most from political unrest. But things have in the biblical narrative.

Both Batseba's and David's behavior is told in different ways, in ways that were irritating to David's royal court, and that are even irritating today. David mourns in a way his servants are completely unfamiliar with. He does not take it like a man; and then, after the death of the child

can no longer be denied, he suddenly ceases to lament. He starts to eat and drink, and then he goes to the temple to pray. After that, he does something that has not been told about him before. He does not call for Batseba, but he goes to her. Her goes out, he reaches out to console her. Something that even Uriah never did. The woman is important enough to think about what he can do to her, instead of just taking and raping her.

And Batseba: mourns as well, but she no longer left alone in her grief, but has someone to console, to courses, to share. Maybe it is the grammar of religion that has brought this kind of change, a turn to the hidden human side of violence and might. But I have to confess, that none of the exegetical commentaries I read, not even the feminist ones, mention this.

The Hebrew bible is very precise, however: After consoling Batseba, David went in unto her, and lay with her. What was out of Uriah's soldierly world, becomes part of a new and good reality: David and Batseba, bereft of their newborn baby, for the first time have sex in a meaningful way. From now on, it is no longer king and subject, but man and woman. Just like the lamb lies in the bosom of the poor man, loved like a daughter,

Batseba is a beloved woman and grieving mother. And David no longer throws brutal glances at the feminine body but touches her body and her soul.

If the grammar of religion effects human relationships like this, turning from power and possession to personhood and dignity, religion is need in the public realm more than ever before.

Amen