

Does Abuse Absolve Adultery? A Response to Rachael Denhollander and Others

by Ron Henzel

On May 23, 2018, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary received the resignation of Professor of Missions and Cultural Anthropology David Sills. No reason was given for it publicly at the time. In a statement issued to the *Biblical Recorder*, SBTS President R. Albert Moher, Jr., wrote, “Because this is a personnel matter, we cannot comment further.”¹

The mystery of David Sills’ departure from SBTS lasted about nine months. How that mystery was resolved and the way it has been handled since then raises significant questions for biblical ethics and pastoral counseling that I myself have not seen substantively addressed in either the media coverage or social media discussions of this episode, even though these are questions that lie at the heart of personal responsibility and guilt before God.

On March 8, 2019, an employee in the publishing and distribution division of the SBC, LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, issued a statement on a web site she created for that purpose. In it, Jennifer Lyell, who was 41 at the time of her statement, revealed that she had informed her boss at LifeWay of the following:

I shared how Dr. David Sills, then a tenured professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, first sexually acted against me on a mission trip in 2004, a pattern that continued and escalated for more than a decade following that trip.²

It is necessary to ask here, what does she mean by “sexually acted against me?” Is she talking about rape, which includes either force, threats of bodily harm, rendering a victim unconscious, using deceptive means, etc.³ Or is she referring to sexual coercion, which the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines as “unwanted sexual activity that happens when you are pressured, tricked, threatened, or forced in a nonphysical way?”⁴ Or was she referring to something

¹ *The Pathway*, “MBTS’ Christian George resigns over ‘moral failing,’” at <https://mbcpathway.com/2018/06/22/mbts-christian-george-resigns-over-moral-failing/>.

² Jennifer Lyell, “My Story of Sexual Abuse & Initial Response in the SBC,” March 8, 2019, paragraph 3, <https://www.lyellstatementonabuse.com/abuse-disclosure-march-2019>. Hereafter cited as, “My Story....”

³ Legal Information Institute {LII}, Cornell Law School, “10 U.S. Code § 920 - Art. 120. Rape and sexual assault generally,” <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/920>. **Note: due to the eccentricities of our web site’s footnote generator, I have abandoned the standard use of parentheses in bibliographical and other types of references and will sometimes use braces/curly brackets where parentheses would normally be used.**

⁴ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health {OASH}, Office on Women’s Health, “Sexual coercion,” <https://www.womenshealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/other-types/sexual-coercion>.

entirely different, something like seduction?⁵ Her language here, while not unheard of,⁶ is ambiguous.

This ambiguity is problematic, especially considering her other remarks, as for example here:

So that day when I shared what had happened to me with my boss at LifeWay and then later with SBTS President, Dr. R. Albert Mohler, I was quick to also share the responsibility I bore for being compliant at times, for not telling immediately, and for so idolizing the idea of a whole family that I protected it despite what was happening within it. I am not a sinless victim. But I am a victim nonetheless.⁷

By saying she was “compliant at times,” is she indicating that at other times, perhaps even most of the time, she was not compliant, i.e., that she was forced? How does this fit into her overall description of a situation that lasted for more than a decade and involved her becoming “like part of [Sills’] family?”⁸ And if she was raped according to the legal definition of that term, is it ethical to not clearly disclose that fact as she goes public with this part of her personal history? Could she also in such a case be somehow inadvertently shielding a dangerous sexual predator and putting other women at risk of physical rape by being ambiguous and not informing law enforcement authorities? These are sincere questions born out of my genuine confusion.

I am not a lawyer, nor do I play one on TV, so do not read anything I write here as a legal opinion or advice. All the views and opinions I express here are purely theological, representing my understanding of how to interpret the Bible apply it to our lives. And because of the very ambiguity I have just cited, I want to tread very, very carefully. I by no means want to add any pain or suffering to what Ms. Lyell has already experienced. Even if her relationship with Sills was entirely consensual, for well-established pastoral reasons he bears far greater guilt. His sin was aggravated by so many factors that it must be treated as more heinous by Christ’s church.⁹ And I can say this

⁵ “The use of charm, promises, and flattery to induce another person to have sexual intercourse outside of marriage, without any use of force or intimidation. At one time, seduction was a crime in many states, but seduction is no longer criminal {unless the seduced person is underage or otherwise unable to consent}. However, seduction does linger in the criminal codes of some states.” From the article titled, “seduction,” definition from Nolo’s Plain-English Law Dictionary, LII, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/seduction>.

⁶ However, I have only found a couple examples of its usage, both in a judicial context where the sexual abuse of children is in view. E.g.: “the desire to sexually act against a child,” from the U.S. Department of Justice, The National Strategy for Child Exploitation and Prevention and Interdiction: A Report to Congress, August 2010, 143. At <https://www.justice.gov/psc/docs/natstrategyreport.pdf>. Also: “he is aroused by and has an urge to sexually act against juveniles,” from “In the Matter of the Civil Commitment of W.T.,” Justia, from its section, “New Jersey Superior Court, Appellate Division - Unpublished Opinions Decisions” for 2015. <https://law.justia.com/cases/new-jersey/appellate-division-unpublished/2015/a5003-14.html>.

⁷ Jennifer Lyell, “My Story...,” paragraph 6.

⁸ Jennifer Lyell, “My Story...,” paragraph 4.

⁹ Question 151 of the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648 {WLC} asks, “What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?” It answers, “Sins receive their aggravations, From the persons offending: if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others.” Sills certainly fits everything in this description. He also fits the following:

confidently even before considering that I have no reason to doubt that he was the aggressor and not her.

But this is far from where the story ends.

My understanding of the current controversy

The same day in March 2019 that Jennifer Lyell published her account online, the *Baptist Press* reported on it and described it as,

...a statement of allegations including details of what she says was a morally inappropriate relationship with Sills for more than a decade, beginning while she was a Southern Seminary student.¹⁰

Lyell did not find this wording acceptable. Seven months later, in a follow-up “Clarification” post on her web site¹¹ she accused the *Baptist Press* of “inaccurately reporting my abuse disclosure”¹² but did not state what the inaccuracy was. She didn’t have to. Two days earlier on October 5, the VP for Communications on the SBC’s Executive Committee (EC), Jonathan Howe, issued a statement in which he wrote,

I’m also aware that the story omitted all references to abuse and a lack of consent to sexual activity, and was framed as “a morally inappropriate relationship.”¹³

For multiple reasons, this was not merely an issue on the level of correcting a typo. And one of those reasons reflects quite poorly on the church. Tragically—even infuriatingly—during the months prior to Howe’s statement and the removal of the *Baptist Press* article, some Christians were quick to cast stones.

The fallout was quick and devastating. Lyell was labeled on social media as an “adulteress” rather than an abuse survivor, with users leaving scores of vile

“From the parties offended: ...against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them, or any other, and the common good of all or many.” This is also relevant: “...if done deliberately, wilfully, presumptuously...frequently...” For the full answer, refer to the complete WLC, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-larger-catechism/>.

¹⁰ David Roach and Shawn Hendricks, “New details of former SBTS prof’s resignation alleged,” *Baptist Press*, March 18, 2019. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190614031359/http://www.bpnews.net/52542/new-details-of-former-sbts-profs-resignation-alleged>.

¹¹ Jennifer Lyell, “Clarification on Inaccurate Reporting by the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention/Baptist Press, A Letter to Interested Southern Baptists,” October 7, 2019, at <https://www.lyellstatementonabuse.com/clarification-on-inaccurate-reporting-by-the-executive-committeebaptist-press>. Hereafter cited as “Clarification....”

¹² Jennifer Lyell, “Clarification....,” paragraph 1.

¹³ Jonathan Howe, statement published on Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee letterhead, October 5, 2019.

comments about her on Lifeway’s Facebook page and the Baptist Press website. Pastors and churches called for her to be fired. She lost her reputation, her job and even her health in the process.

The article was eventually retracted, but the damage was done.¹⁴

This was inexcusable. In situations like this, Christians should be asking themselves, “How can I best care for this fellow believer?” Joining an online mob is not one of the options. No matter what we think of any of the details of her story, Jennifer Lyell bravely performed a great service to the Lord for the protection of His church for which we should all be deeply grateful.

Now, it happened that the same day the *Baptist Press* ran their original story in March, which has since been taken down, another publication by Southern Baptists, the *Biblical Recorder*,¹⁵ published an edited version of the *Baptist Press* story which changed the words, “what she says was a morally inappropriate relationship with Sills,” to the more accurate, “what she describes as sexual abuse by Sills.” As of this writing, the *Biblical Recorder* version is still online.¹⁶ So, why did it take so long for the SBC EC to make the correction?

The timing of Jonathan Howe’s statement coincided with the end of the widely publicized 2019 conference, “Caring Well: Equipping Churches to Confront the Abuse Crisis,” which ran from October 3 to 5, sponsored by the SBC’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). A highlight of that conference was a conversation between ERLC President Russell Moore and Jennifer Lyell’s attorney, Rachael Denhollander,¹⁷ who complained that the *Baptist Press* “used the same language to describe her abuse that is used for consensual affairs.”¹⁸

So, the clearly defined focal point of the controversy is this question: When Jennifer Lyell had sex with David Sills over a roughly twelve-year period, was it consensual or was it non-consensual? Denhollander remains adamant that it was not.¹⁹ So adamant is she that she now characterizes the

¹⁴ Bob Smietana “Jennifer Lyell wanted to stop her abuser by telling her story. Instead, her life fell apart.” March 18, 2021, *Religion News Service*. <https://religionnews.com/2021/03/18/jennifer-lyell-wanted-to-stop-her-abuser-by-telling-her-story-instead-her-life-fell-apart/>.

¹⁵ The *Biblical Recorder* is owned by the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina which is associated with the SBC.

¹⁶ *Baptist Press* and *Biblical Recorder* Staff, “New details of former SBTS prof’s resignation alleged,” March 8, 2019, <https://www.brnow.org/news/New-details-of-former-SBTS-prof-s-resignation-alle/>.

¹⁷ On July 7, 2020, at 11:19 AM, Rachael Denhollander tweeted, “...as one of Ms. Lyell’s attorneys...” at https://twitter.com/R_Denhollander/status/1280521863492403203.

¹⁸ Rachael Denhollander, “What Is a Girl Worth?: A conversation with Rachael Denhollander and Russell Moore on the Church’s Abuse Crisis,” ERLC, 05:55-06:01, uploaded October 8, 2019, at <https://vimeo.com/365072432>. Hereafter cited as “What is a Girl Worth?”

¹⁹ As recently as June 10, 2020, Denhollander posted a ten-tweet thread on her Twitter account reiterating her view.

Baptist Press's modification of Lyell's authorial intent as, "the intentional defamation of Jen Lyell."²⁰

My primary concern

What troubles me here is not the question of whether the *Baptist Press* transgressed some legal standard of defamation by implying Lyell's physical relationship with Sills was consensual. Nor is it the question of whether the legal definition of what qualifies as "non-consensual" has become far too broad. I certainly have opinions on these issues but admit that I lack the kind of expertise a legal scholar would have to judge such matters.

Instead, what deeply troubles me is the question of whether we are witnessing a purely secular legal definition of consent, one to which clear biblical and theological objections quickly arise, being imported into Christian ethics and allowed to eclipse the biblical teaching on personal responsibility in our nation's largest evangelical denomination. Even more troubling would be the possibility of such a problematic secular definition being imported under the duress of popular pressure, legal intimidation, or denominational power politics. This has obvious implications not only for church discipline but also for our doctrine of sin, not to mention other doctrines should this pattern continue. It is not the way Scripture calls us to care for the wounded and fallen among us.

I am not the only one to whom these questions have occurred. We must find a way to address them in the "gentle spirit" Scripture calls us to, "watching out for [ourselves] so [we] also won't be tempted," (Gal. 6:1 CSB). That is what I hope to do here, and I trust it was Peter Lumpkins' aim when he wrote the following on his web site the day after Lyell posted her "Clarification" article on her web site:

Assuming a unilateral manipulative, exploitative, wrongful beginning ("grooming") of the relationship by the perverted professor, at what point does a 12 year voluntary but illicit sexual relationship between two grown adults, at times, miles apart, cease to be a unilaterally manipulative, exploitative, and wrongful relationship? Or does it? Are we to understand that a 38 year old woman who is having a sexual relationship with a married man, and does so at long distances, is doing so because she is trapped in a sexual abuse scandal in which she cannot escape?...

Baptist Press caving into the pressure by Caring Well celebrities and conference attenders to both apologize for publishing and then retracting a story that fundamentally was correct remains a dangerous precedent for our news wire service.

²⁰ Rachael Denhollander, tweet, Jun 10, 2021, at 7:12 PM ET, at https://twitter.com/R_Denhollander/status/1403127891643228162.

More problematic still is the notion that the definition of sexual abuse has now been broadened to include voluntary sexual affairs by two consenting adults. It's true that powerful people in authoritative positions can exploit, manipulate, and deceive others into an initially unwanted relationship. Granted. No one is suggesting otherwise, and we rightly condemn it when it undeniably takes place.

However, to argue that an illicit relationship between two adults that started by devious exploitation of one over the other while the other was under the manipulative person's authority but continued on years later after no such authority was present remains morally absurd.

And to travel down such a twisted moral highway equipped with no brakes on the definition of "consensual sex" and such slick tires as presented here will only land us at the bottom of a deep ravine.²¹

I think Lumpkins fairly summarizes here the salient problems with the specifics of Lyell's account, how the SBC is handling them, and the implications for doctrine and practice. I, too, find it difficult to believe that a power dynamic has the ethical efficacy not only to nullify but continue nullifying personal consent to commit acts traditionally considered sinful long after a person is out from under said power dynamic, and I am alarmed over where this idea will lead us, especially for people who have been victimized as Lyell has.

But I would go beyond what Lumpkins wrote to interrogate the very premise that consent, responsibility, and guilt somehow dissolve away when dropped into a solution of control, manipulation, and power dynamics. From where I sit, Rachael Denhollander and others are so convinced that this premise is true that they have elevated it to a hermeneutical principle they then use to control the meaning of Scripture. This was vividly illustrated on the day the "Caring Well" conference began when The Gospel Coalition's managing editor, Matt Smethurst, tweeted the statement "David fornicated,"²² and Denhollander responded by tweeting, "David raped. It's important we get that right."²³

This sparked a social media storm that spilled over into blogs and even secular news sites.²⁴ Perhaps the scale and passion of the dispute can be attributed both to the novelty of the assertion

²¹ Peter Lumpkins, "What is a Consensual Sexual Affair?" October 8, 2019, paragraphs 11 and 16 through 19. https://peterlumpkins.typepad.com/peter_lumpkins/2019/10/what-is-a-consensual-sexual-affair.html. Peter Lumpkins is Associate Professor of history and Christian Studies at Truett McConnell University, Georgia.

²² Matt Smethurst, tweet, Oct 3, 2019, at 8:13 PM ET, at <https://twitter.com/MattSmethurst/status/1179912370103160832>.

²³ Rachael Denhollander, tweet, Oct 3, 2019, at 10:49 PM ET, at https://twitter.com/R_Denhollander/status/1179951763295817728.

²⁴ E.g., Bonnie Kristian, "The political implications of a Biblical rape, Why Christians are suddenly arguing over whether King David was a rapist," October 10, 2019. <https://theweek.com/articles/870277/political-implications-biblical-rape>.

and the various socio-political divides in evangelicalism. As the fracas began, Denhollander summarized her case for her position at the “Caring Well” conference when she said,

David didn’t fornicate; David raped. And if you understand the power dynamics, and you understand the Hebrew, and you look at the Levitical examples and discussion of rape, and you understand what Nathan is saying in his parable, it is *abundantly* clear from that text that David raped.²⁵

It is unclear from these remarks or her tweet whether Denhollander is aware of just how recent the “David raped” interpretation is, or of the questions that its newness raises for just how “abundantly clear” it is. Extended scholarly treatments of this novel view have been relatively few in number.

But what seems clear is that Denhollander believes the traditional interpretation of 2 Samuel 11 as an adultery narrative is harmful to victims of sexual abuse today and that it needs to be modified according to modern and postmodern concepts of power dynamics. It also seems clear that she is using the “David raped” thesis to remove personal agency and thus culpability from Bathsheba in the sex she had with David, while using it for the same purpose with respect to the case of David Sills’ sin with Jennifer Lyell. Is her reinterpretation of Scripture valid? I assume she means well, but after surveying the relevant scholarly literature, I believe she is tragically misinformed.

My survey of the relevant literature, annotated by year and interpretation

The more time I spent on this article and the longer it got, the more I anticipated people texting, tweeting, or in some other way messaging me with, “tl;dr,” (“too long; didn’t read”). So, I broke this next long section down with headers designed to facilitate skimming by boiling down the main point of each section. Each annotation represents the scholarly interpretation of the David and Bathsheba story that I discuss. Feel free to just read the headings of the ones you are not interested in knowing more about until you come to “My conclusion to my survey,” even if that’s all of them.

1988: “David may have raped, but who knows?”

The earliest use of “rape” in connection with the story of David and Bathsheba I have been able to directly verify is from feminist biblical scholar Gale A. Yee, who had trouble deciding whether the term applies in 2 Samuel 11:

The narrative continues in its equivocal, spare style: “So David sent messengers and took her; and she came to him and he lay with her” (11:4). The detail that David “took her” suggests force. However, the fact that “she came to him” raises the question whether or not she came to David willingly. Did they have “a great time in bed,” or did Bathsheba experience the horror of being raped? What did she feel when she discovered her pregnancy as a result of the experience?²⁶

²⁵ Rachael Denhollander, “What is a Girl Worth?” 17:38-17:55, emphasis hers. At <https://vimeo.com/365072432>.

²⁶ Gale A. Yee, “‘Fraught with Background,’ Literary Ambiguity in II Samuel 11,” *Interpretation*, 42 no 3 Jul 1988, 243. Yee was Assistant Professor of Old Testament at the College of St. Thomas.

Yee was actually studying the use of ambiguity as a literary device in 2 Samuel 11 and for her the question of how consensual the sex was between David and Bathsheba was an example of that ambiguity—in other words, it was far from abundantly clear—and she noted that this was widely acknowledged by scholars.²⁷

1989: “Bathsheba was David’s accomplice in adultery.”

But the traditional adultery view never saw the text as so ambiguous as to allow for rape. And following the traditional view, Arnold A. Anderson presented his understanding of its implications in his contribution to the Word commentary series.²⁸ He assumed Bathsheba was not a victim but an “accomplice.”²⁹ Referring to 2 Sam. 11:26-27a, he wrote,

The culprits receive their immediate “reward” and they get each other: Bathsheba becomes David’s wife.³⁰

So, what Anderson meant when he not only referred to David’s “adultery”³¹ but also to “David’s affair with Bathsheba”³² is clear: Bathsheba was both an “accomplice” and one of the “culprits.” He saw it as a completely consensual relationship.

By twice applying the word “affair” to 2 Sam. 11,³³ Anderson was following Hebraist Jacob Weingreen,³⁴ whom he quotes referring to “David’s ruthlessness and the affair with Bathsheba.”³⁵ Weingreen also referred to it as “David’s unsavoury affair with Bathsheba”³⁶ and “his sordid affair with Bathsheba.”³⁷ By the time of Weingreen’s writing (1969), other scholars had already

²⁷ Yee wrote: “We have chosen to analyze a story which is well known for its literary ambiguity: II Samuel 11—the David and Bathsheba affair. The ambiguity pervading this story has already provoked much discussion.” She then provides an extensive footnote documenting discussions from the 1960s and ’70s. “‘Fraught with Background,’” 241.

²⁸ Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary Volume 11, Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1989. Anderson was Honorary Fellow in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Manchester, UK.

²⁹ Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 156.

³⁰ Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 152.

³¹ Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 156.

³² Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 152.

³³ Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 152 and 154. He also refers to Uriah as “the cuckolded husband” on 152.

³⁴ Jacob Weingreen, 1908-1995, was Professor of Hebrew at Trinity College, Dublin and the author of *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1st edition, 1955; 2nd edition, 1959.

³⁵ Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 195, citing Jacob Weingreen, “The Rebellion of Absalom,” *Vetus Testamentum* 19, 1969, 266.

³⁶ Jacob Weingreen, “The Rebellion of Absalom,” 264.

³⁷ Jacob Weingreen, “The Rebellion of Absalom,” also 264.

suggested that Bathsheba was a willing participant. In 1964, H.W. Hertzberg found “feminine flirtation” in Bathsheba’s behavior.³⁸

1990: “Bathsheba was David’s willing and equal partner in adultery and afterward.”

Noted for using feminist methodology and being “one of the nation’s leading scholars of the Bible, Sex, and Sexualities,”³⁹ Randall C. Bailey was in obvious agreement with Anderson’s version of the traditional view. He provided a quite detailed exegetical argument from the Hebrew text that Bathsheba was far from a passive victim but “she is here [in 2 Sam 11:4] as well as throughout the narrative a willing and equal partner to the events that transpire.”⁴⁰

But at that time, it seems most feminist authors contented themselves to view the text as ambiguous and work within that constraint. As we shall see, at least some of those who saw it that way had an agenda-driven reason for sticking with that approach—and the agenda may have been similar to Bailey’s: to depict Bathsheba as a strong and ambitious woman.

1990: “Nathan used a ‘parable of power dynamics’ to accuse David of raping Bathsheba.”

Walter Brueggemann published the first commentary I have found which comes to the precise opposite conclusion from Bailey’s and labels David a rapist.⁴¹ But what is most odd is that Brueggemann makes no statement about this in his comments on 2 Sam. 11 but makes us wait until Nathan’s confrontation of David in chapter 12, where he wrote:

Nathan’s story is subtle in its wording. It obviously makes an economic contrast between great and little. With the words “lie” and “took,” however, there is also an accusation of rape. The rich man raped the daughterlike treasure of the poor man.⁴²

It is also worth noting Brueggemann’s focus on the power dynamics in David’s and Bathsheba’s relationship in his comments on chapter 11. Of David, he wrote, “He is at the culmination of his enormous power,” and of Bathsheba, “Nonetheless the world-shattering words of Bathsheba [‘I am pregnant’] completely nullify the royal power of David.”⁴³ This was not the only place

³⁸ Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, London: SCM Press, 1964, 309, as cited by Richard M. Davidson, “Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 17/2 Autumn 2006: 81. Hertzberg (1895-1965) had been Professor of Old Testament at the University of Kiel, Germany.

³⁹ Billy Michael Honor, “A Tribute to Dr. Randall Bailey: Biblical Scholar, Intellectual Freedom Fighter and Committed Contrarian,” May 26, 2019. <https://www.bmhonor.com/blog/2019/5/26/a-tribute-to-dr-randall-bailey-biblical-scholar-intellectual-freedom-fighter-and-committed-contrarian>. Bailey was Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta.

⁴⁰ Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 75, Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1990, 86.

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation commentary series, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 280.

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 274.

Brueggemann focused on power in his exegetical method at that time⁴⁴ and it might go unnoticed in our present context were it not for how it ties simultaneously to Rachael Denhollander's reference to "the power dynamics" and to how the postmodernist approach to power consistently lies in the background of later writers who argue more forcefully for the "David raped" thesis. Not long after he produced this commentary, Brueggemann published *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*,⁴⁵ in which he argued for accommodating our approach to Scripture and theology to postmodernism. The problems inherent in this program were not lost on conservative evangelical writers of that time.⁴⁶

1993: "We'll never know whether David raped Bathsheba, but we know the author of 2 Samuel 'raped' her."

Feminist scholar J. Cheryl Exum⁴⁷ was more concerned about authorial intent than what actually happened in 2 Sam. 11 when she wrote:

Whereas some commentators recognize Bathsheba's status as a passive object, rare is the commentator who would go so far as to describe this encounter as rape.⁴⁸

But when identifying those who would "describe this encounter as rape" she clarified that they only "raise[d] the question of rape."⁴⁹ Perhaps she was unaware of Brueggemann's commentary.

Exum's own concern was not to charge David with rape but to charge the presumably male author of 2 Samuel of a kind of "literary rape" of Bathsheba. She wrote:

By denying her subjectivity, the narrator symbolically rapes Bathsheba, and by withholding her point of view, he presents an ambiguous portrayal that leaves her vulnerable to the charge of seduction.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ It was the central focus of Brueggemann's essay, "A Gospel Language of Pain and Possibility," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13, No 2, December 1991, 95-133.

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

⁴⁶ Cf. D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, 131, 169-172, 248. Also, Walter Moberly, in Book Reviews, *Themelios* 20, no 2, January 1995, 25.

⁴⁷ J. Cheryl Exum is now Emeritus Professor at the University of Sheffield.

⁴⁸ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist {Sub}versions of Biblical Narratives*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 163, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993, 173. Hereafter cited as *Fragmented Women*. Note: the pagination differs in the 2nd edition printed by Bloomsbury T&T Clark in 2016.

⁴⁹ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 173, note 4. The two scholars she cited were Gale A. Yee, "Fraught with Background," 243, and Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, Indiana University Press, 1987. I am not yet able to access Bal's work.

⁵⁰ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 173-174, from the section titled "The 'Rape' of Bathsheba" in chapter 6, "Raped by the Pen."

So, for Exum there is too little information to establish rape from the text itself. But employing a hermeneutic of suspicion causes her to see that the ambiguity she and others find in the text was in reality a deliberate and malicious ploy by a sexist male author to smear Bathsheba's reputation by leaving too much to the imagination. This "rape of the pen," as she calls it,⁵¹ was accomplished "by withholding her point of view."

Fast-forward to 1997: "Response to Exum: There is no rape at all in the text."

Along the way, Exum charges contemporary male biblical scholars with acting as accomplices to this "symbolic rape" for suggesting that Bathsheba's role may have been entirely consensual.⁵² One of those scholars, George G. Nicol, not only responded to Exum's charge but addressed the question that Exum herself found too lacking in evidence to definitively answer:

...I have found no reason to believe that David used force or that Bathsheba was unwilling to respond to David's initiative....

... I do not think that it would be easy—or perhaps even possible—to construct any coherent and consistent reading that treated the story as one of rape.⁵³

Rewind to 1994: "David raped Bathsheba, but she got the upper-hand."

The earliest example of a scholar building a case for the "David raped" thesis from the text of 2 Sam. 11 itself that I have been able to locate is by Trevor Dennis. As we saw with Brueggemann (who based his case on chapter 12), we find lens of relational power dynamics being given hermeneutical privilege in reading 2 Sam. 11. Commenting on verse 5, Dennis wrote:

She is doing what David did. She is sending him a message. She is answering his show of power with hers. He asserted his power over her by raping her. She asserts her power over him by conveying to him the words: 'I am pregnant.'⁵⁴

Again, as Brueggemann's exegesis showed, once the theme of "power" is moved from the background to the foreground as postmodernists are inclined to do, the author seems confident in shutting the door on ambiguity. And, depending on the agenda, "power" can then become a controlling hermeneutic to deconstruct the text in such a way as to make the "David raped" thesis a foregone conclusion. Or it can be used in other ways, as we shall see.

⁵¹ Exum introduces this concept beginning on page 170 of *Fragmented Women*.

⁵² Ironically, Exum is familiar with Randall C. Bailey's work but except for a minor footnote on page 175 she does not interact with it in *Fragmented Women*.

⁵³ George G. Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 73, 1997, 52 and 53.

⁵⁴ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 149, as cited by Richard M. Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba?" 90. Dennis was Canon of Chester Cathedral, UK.

It is difficult to overstate how much this changed the rules of the exegetical game on the field of 2 Sam. 11. Exum was not unaware of how “the power dynamic” could alter one’s understanding of the text. She hinted at this when she wrote that David’s “position of power gives him an advantage,” even considering the possibility of “sexual extortion,”⁵⁵ but she did not give these concepts sufficient weight to overturn what she saw as the ambiguity of the text, therefore she did not place it in the interpretive foreground.

1996: “It is inadvertently disrespectful to Bathsheba to say she was raped by David.”

Not known for being a traditionalist on the topic of gender relations, Ruth Ann Foster did not think highly of Dennis’s conclusions:

His approach, which actually centers more on the perspective of feminist theology, elevates an agenda over the text itself...

Though his motive is good in seeking to avoid patronizing these women by canonizing them as saints, he does, however, patronize them in other ways. The biblical text itself is replete with positive images of strong, courageous, spiritual, loyal, and insightful women who prevailed within harsh and unjust conditions. In his effort to reveal the misogynist conjectures of male interpreters (which is to be affirmed), Dennis often bases his interpretation on as much conjecture as the misogynist interpretation. His conjectures devalue these women by assuming that their stories and experiences cannot stand on their own. For example, to argue the rape of Bathsheba (p. 143) or the priestly role of Zipporah (p. 108) with no clear textual evidence errs in the same way as blaming Eve for seducing Adam.⁵⁶

1999: “It had to be rape, because we know more about power differentials now.”

The next serious attempt to make a case for David raping Bathsheba came from Larry W. Spielman, who asked the question,

Was their involvement one of mutual consent, or was Bathsheba raped by David?⁵⁷

He answers his own question implicitly a few pages later:

The political, social, and personal power differential between David and Bathsheba is too great for there to be mutual consent.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 172-173.

⁵⁶ Ruth Ann Foster (1947-2006), “Book Reviews,” *Journal of Church and State* 38, No 2, Spring 1996, 419. was Associate Professor of Christian Scriptures at Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

⁵⁷ Larry W. Spielman, “David’s Abuse of Power,” *Word & World*, Volume XIX, Number 3, Summer 1999, 251. Spielman was a Lutheran pastor.

⁵⁸ Larry W. Spielman, “David’s Abuse of Power,” 254.

Surprisingly, on the first page of his article Spielman acknowledges the nature of this fundamental hermeneutical premise:

The *anachronistic* exercise of relating the story of David and Bathsheba to modern leadership literature provides a way to reflect on significant issues of leadership and power.⁵⁹

Where I come from, anachronistically reading current concepts into ancient texts is a bad way to exegete Scripture.

1999: “Bathsheba’s later history may be evidence of her complicity in adultery.”

Robert Alter did not find rape in the text when he commented on 2 Samuel 11:4:

David sent... and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her. It is not uncommon for biblical narrative to use a chain of verbs in this fashion to indicate rapid, single-minded action. What is unusual is that one verb in the middle of this sequence switches grammatical subject—from David to Bathsheba. When the verb “come to” or “come into” has a masculine subject and “into” is followed by a feminine object, it designates a first act of sexual intercourse. One wonders whether the writer is boldly toying with this double meaning, intimating an element of active participation by Bathsheba in David’s sexual summons. The text is otherwise entirely silent on her feelings, giving the impression that she is passive as others act on her. But her later behavior in the matter of her son’s succession to the throne (1 Kings 1-2) suggests a woman who has her eye on the main chance, and it is possible that opportunism, not merely passive submission, explains her behavior here as well. In all of this, David’s sending messengers first to ask about Bathsheba and then to call her to his bed means that the adultery can scarcely be a secret within the court.⁶⁰

2000: “Bathsheba was probably—and understandably—complicit in David’s adultery.”

Feminist authors at that time also remained unconvinced that David raped Bathsheba, and some continued to lend support to Bailey’s conclusion (and Alter’s suggestion) that Bathsheba was David’s willing sex partner. Jewish feminist scholar Lillian R. Klein wrote,

In this scene, David’s association with active verbs, particularly his repeated exercise of *שלח*, ‘send’, marks his command of the situation. Bathsheba, though she is the object of male actions—she ‘is taken’ (from *לקח*) by the servant and David lays with her—is not utterly passive; she ‘comes’ (from *בוא*) to David. Noting that

⁵⁹ Larry W. Spielman, “David’s Abuse of Power,” 254. Italics mine.

⁶⁰ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, Kindle Edition, 383. Alter was Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

Bathsheba's arrival and sexual involvement are fully covered without the phrase, 'and she came to him', the reader is alerted to excess verbiage, bordering on redundancy, which demands attention. The superfluous words do serve to mitigate Bathsheba's passivity, to be sure; and the use of 'come', with its connotations of sexuality, insinuates Bathsheba's complicity in the sexual adventure. From Bathsheba's point-of-view, her complicity with the king's wishes may be regarded as her attempt to bear a child rather than merely participation in an adulterous (lustful) act.⁶¹

For feminists like Klein, Bathsheba's consensual participation in David's adultery is not to be viewed as an act of moral weakness but of feminist power and should thus be celebrated.⁶² This is the "agenda-driven reason" I referred to earlier. Obviously, "power" can be used to deconstruct texts in multiple ways. Even though Bailey, who was influenced by feminism, had "power" right in the title his book, he too came to the opposite conclusion from Brueggemann's, writing, "Thus the David-Bathsheba affair is one of adultery. The Amnon-Tamar episode is one of rape."⁶³

2006: "David committed a 'power rape.'"

Perhaps the most detailed argument seeking to establish the "David raped" thesis has come from Richard M. Davidson.⁶⁴ Davidson gave careful attention to the Hebrew text but did not find anything new that other scholars had not already addressed with respect to the central verse under contention, where he already signaled the basis of his conclusion by the heading he provided: "Verbs of Initiative Indicating David's Power Rape (v. 4)." He credits Trevor Dennis and Moshe Garsiel for much of his material, even though Garsiel refers to David's act as "adultery" 14 times and never calls it "rape," and also relies on Larry W. Spielman, but just as it was with Dennis and Spielman, Davidson allows contemporary concepts foreign to Scripture become the ultimate interpretive authority over the text:

Given the context of (at least psychological) coercion in this passage, the best modern expression to describe David's action is "power rape," in which a person in a position of authority abuses that "power" to victimize a subservient and vulnerable person sexually, whether or not the victim appears to give "consent." David, the king, appointed by God to defend the helpless and vulnerable, becomes

⁶¹ Lillian R. Klein, "Bathsheba Revealed," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Second Series 7, Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 49. This paragraph is duplicated in Klein's *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, 56, except with the Hebrew words transliterated.

⁶² This is explained by editor Athalya Brenner in her introductory comments on Klein's essay: "Far from being a victim, Bathsheba does what is expected of any biblical woman—all she can do, honestly or otherwise, to become a mother. Her strength is apparent in the way she secures her son's reign too; and her motivation is implicitly justified by her becoming mother to a great king." *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, "Introduction," 15.

⁶³ Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12*, 17.

⁶⁴ Richard M. Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 17/2 Autumn 2006: 81-95. Davidson was Professor of Old Testament Interpretation of Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary. Hereafter cited as "Did King David Rape Bathsheba?"

a victimizer of the vulnerable. Just as intercourse between an adult and a minor, even a “consenting” minor, is today termed “statutory rape,” so the intercourse between David and his subject Bathsheba (even if Bathsheba, under the psychological pressure of one in power over her, acquiesced to the intercourse) is understood in biblical law, and so presented in this narrative, to be a case of rape—what today we call “power rape,” and the victimizer, not the victim, is held accountable.⁶⁵

2007: “Even if she was attracted to him and compliant, David raped Bathsheba.”

David E. Garland and Diana R. Garland provided one of the most brazen examples of how dominating the postmodernist power concept could become when it is given a privileged hermeneutical position:

Most interpreters of this story have ignored the inherent power differential between a king and one of his female subjects, and this king was invested not only with political power but also spiritual power....

Perhaps she was flattered by his attention. He was a handsome man; perhaps she found herself attracted to him. Even if she was flattered by the attention of the king, however, and even if she found him attractive, she was not responsible for what happened. Since consent was impossible, given her powerless position, David in essence raped her. Rape means to have sex against the will, without the consent, of another—and she did not have the power to consent. Even if there was no physical struggle, even if she gave in to him, it was rape.⁶⁶

2011: “Making David into a rapist illegitimately reads contemporary concepts into the text.”

Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili thought it appropriate to review the state of this discussion up to that point in time. After interacting with several of the authors I have cited, including Davidson, he wrote:

...to conclude that he ‘raped’ Bathsheba (in the Hebrew biblical understanding of ‘rape’) would be to push the evidence too far and read too much of our contemporary conception of rape into the biblical text. Obviously, the type of physical force implied in the Hebrew biblical concept of rape is absent in 2 Sam 11:4.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Richard M. Davidson, “Did King David Rape Bathsheba?” 89. I find it difficult to understand how Ronald F. Youngblood (1931-2014) could have believed that Davidson “argues convincingly...that Bathsheba is “a victim of a ‘power rape’ on the part of David.” in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: 1 Samuel-2 Kings*, Rev. Ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009, 3:432.

⁶⁶ David E. Garland and Diana R. Garland, *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God’s Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007, 160-161. David E. Garland was Dean of George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Diana R. Garland (d. 2015) was Dean of the School of Social Work at Baylor University.

⁶⁷ Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, “Was it Rape? The David and Bathsheba Pericope Re-examined,” *Vetus Testamentum* 61, 2011, 14. Abasili was a scholar at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven [Catholic University of

My conclusion to my survey

Based on my observations, no one, not even feminist scholars, found a basis for saying David raped Bathsheba until the postmodern concept of power dynamics was read anachronistically into the biblical text. (In fact, many feminists have resisted the “David raped” thesis.) This procedure has far-reaching implications, not only for the interpretation of narrative texts like 2 Samuel 11, but for all of Scripture, and none of those implications are good.

Sadly, it seems Rachael Denhollander is unaware that she has stepped into a contrived, inconsistent, and controversial interpretive tradition built on a very tenuous scholarly foundation that was in turn laid on top of a faulty hermeneutic. The arguments for it are not sound. She has vastly overstated her case, especially that it is “abundantly clear,” and it is a dangerous case to present to an unwitting Christian audience. I would sincerely appeal to her to reconsider her position.

Once we sacrifice a proper approach to understanding Scripture, we greatly jeopardize our ability to apply it lovingly, pastorally, and effectively to those crushed by abusers in the church.

How my life relates to this story

I will now abruptly switch gears and write about myself. I do this because, on one level, I think I can relate to Jennifer Lyell.

For about five and a half years, my wife and I were members of a spiritually abusive group. Even though it had an evangelical statement of faith, I would go so far as to call it a cult. When I describe it to those who have studied cults, they agree. Overall, it was a horrendous experience. We were deceived, manipulated, verbally abused, and emotionally traumatized. We sat through a seemingly endless series of spiritual struggle sessions in which it wasn’t enough to confess the sins we knew, but we also had to confess the sins our leader “saw” in our hearts.

For roughly three of those years, I followed the example of other members and complied with the leader’s teaching that I needed to separate from my family, which inflicted great suffering on them. But the resulting isolation also made it easier for the leader to abuse us.

After years of this, I broke. By the time we finally left, my wife and I were both devastated wrecks. After nearly three decades, I still find it agonizing to relive. I would prefer not to write about it at all.

Leuven] Belgium. This essay was reviewed at the beginning of the “David raped” controversy by Denny Burk in “Adultery or Rape? What happened between David and Bathsheba?” October 9, 2019.

<https://www.dennyburk.com/adultery-or-rape-what-happened-between-david-and-bathsheba/>

For help in regaining spiritual and emotional stability, in addition to Scripture (which I was having trouble reading clearly because of my experience), I turned to books on cults and spiritual abuse. In one of those books, I read the following:

Someone who is recruited into a destructive cult should not be blamed. Family members and friends should regard what happened as an example of destructive mind control. I have been told time and time again that a person who comes out of a destructive cult feels psychologically raped. Get angry with the cult. Get angry at all mind control cults. But *don't get angry at the person who has been victimized*. It isn't his fault!⁶⁸

Since one of the requirements of my former cult was confessing even our most intimate, most humiliating sins, along with sins we never committed, only to see them all shared with others when we left, even though we were promised confidentiality, the description of being “psychologically raped” rang true for me. But the idea that I should not be blamed for any of the choices I made because I was a victim of mind control did not. And it still doesn't.

Being conned in a very subtle and sophisticated manner into sinning against my parents and siblings does not absolve me from that sin. Being expertly manipulated into doing wrong does not erase my guilt.

Eve was “groomed,” manipulated, and deceived by the Master Deceiver in a way no other woman was, and the results of her guilt are with us to this day (Gen. 3). Peter and Barnabas were conned by false brethren from the Judaizing power-playing faction in the church and manipulated into behaving in a manner that contradicted the Gospel. As a result of their guilt, Paul “opposed [Peter] to his face because he stood condemned,” (Gal. 2:11ff. CSB).

The choices we make in the face of power, manipulation, and deception are still our choices and God will hold us responsible for them. This fact should not crush us, but lead us by the hand, as it were, and lead us to our Savior (1 Jn. 1:6-2:2).

Thankfully, my family was not angry at me when I returned to them; they were very forgiving. But before God and His Law I was still to blame for what I did. I owed them an apology (and so much more than that!) and I hope that over the years I've made good on what I owed.

I agree with the author when he writes, “Get angry with the cult. Get angry at all mind control cults.” Yes, you should be angry with the person who stumbles someone else into sin much more than with the one who stumbles. But that doesn't mean there is no trace of guilt to be confessed and repented of on the part of the person who stumbled.

⁶⁸ Steven Hassan, *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, Rochester, VT, USA: Park Street Press, 1990, 140. Italics his.

I think the worst thing I could have done in that situation was to take that author's advice and believe that I had no guilt in the matter. That would have not only been bad for my relationship with my family and any hope of truly reconciling with them, but it would also have been disastrous for my relationship with God.

And yet, as I understand Scripture, this is the kind of disaster that occurs when someone takes the advice of counselors who tell them that having had sex outside of marriage does not break the fifth commandment as long as their sex partner can be shown to be manipulative and abusive. In this age of the triumph of the therapeutic,⁶⁹ have the hearts and minds of many Christians have become so clouded by the world's methods that one day the church will be asking, as Karl Menninger put it, "Whatever became of sin?"⁷⁰ Will the title of his book come to look like a prophecy for the church rather than a lament for the general culture?

My heart's desire for Jennifer Lyell

I hope I'm not presuming too much, but when Jennifer Lyell writes, "I'm still trying to find a way out of the trauma and confusion," I think I may have some idea, however remotely, of what that's like. Surely, she expresses herself in terms we should all want our own hearts to resonate with when she writes, "I do not want to sin or to miss any sin in me about anything in any situation." Is this not what each of us desire to be the constant attitude of our own souls?

How can we fail to heed Scripture when it admonishes us to be gentle with someone who expresses such a clear heart for the Lord? In the words of J.C. Ryle, "I would not desire to make one contrite heart sad that God has not made sad, or to discourage one fainting child of God..."⁷¹ If Christ would neither break a bruised reed nor quench a smoldering wick (Matt. 2:20; Isa. 42:3), how dare we crush what may appear to us to be mere embers of penitence instead of encouraging them to glow more brightly for Him? If our Lord avoids discouraging even the most fading sparks of penitence, how much more should I? I hope I am following His example here.

Still, I feel compelled by Scripture to say this: While there is no doubt that unfounded accusations against a believer's conscience can seem to all but extinguish that person's hope—I experienced this firsthand to the point where I feared I would both physically and eternally perish—unfounded assurance of innocence can be just as destructive to faith, hope, and every other Christian grace.

If pointing this out grieves anyone, if it nevertheless produces the fruit of a heart yielded to God, I can only that hope that the words of Paul apply to me:

⁶⁹ Cf. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, reprinted 1987; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

⁷⁰ Cf. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973.

⁷¹ J.C. Ryle, 1816-1900, *Holiness: Its Nature, Difficulties, Hinderances, and Roots*, 2nd ed., reprinted 1883; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979, 154.

⁸ For even if I grieved you with my letter, I do not regret it—*even though I did regret it since I saw that the letter grieved you*, yet only for a little while.

⁹ Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance. For you were grieved as God willed, so that you didn't experience any loss from us.

(2 Cor. 7:8-9 CSB; italics added)

If it is true that, as Spurgeon wrote, "...there will be something to be repented of even in our best repentance,"⁷² how much more is it true that there is something to be repented of when we surrender to the fear of man? And is not talk of surrendering to a manipulative or authoritarian power dynamic simply another way of referring to surrendering to the fear of man? And when we cleverly redefine our terms in order to protect people, do we not unwittingly rob them of the real protection offered to us in God's word: "The fear of man is a snare, but the one who trusts in the LORD is *protected*." (Prov. 29:25 CSB)?

I want the best that God has for Jennifer Lyell. I sincerely believe that Rachael Denhollander does, too. But I believe that to continue along the path of assuming that being abused absolves us of any sins we committed during or in response to that abuse, we place ourselves and others in grave peril.
Ω

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⁷² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 1834-1892, *All of Grace*, reprint, Chicago: Moody Press, n.d., 70.