NATHAN’S PARABLE

by

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The parable by which the prophet got the king to acknowledge his sin was not at the outset designed for this case. David committed adultery with Bathsheba while her husband was in the war. Pregnancy ensued. An attempt to trick Uriah into believing that he was the father miscarried, so David was driven to engineer his death. Now Nathan reported to him a crime by a nabob who feasted a caller with a poor fellow-townsmen’s one precious lamb cruelly taken away. David judged the felon in the harshest terms, whereupon Nathan declared: ‘Thou art the man’.

A simile need not pedantically accord with the situation it is to illumine: it may be all the more effective for being somewhat loose, allowing extra scope to imagination. Nevertheless, at times, incongruity betokens revision, be it of the simile, be it of the situation; or indeed, the former may be diverted to the latter from an entirely different context. Where the dissonance is slight, it can be difficult to determine whether or not there has been development. The piece before us is so glaring a misfit as to leave no room for doubt. Unless we choose a further alternative: to attribute to the inventor an extraordinary degree of ineptitude. This is not satisfactory. A leading commentator, obviously feeling that none of the bandaids applied so far will work, recommends denial of anything amiss: ‘It is not necessary to ask whether the example fits the affair David-Uriah in all respects. It is perfectly sufficient that there is described here a flagrant injustice’. He is too undemanding.

It is my hope that Professor Derrett, famed for the unravelling of parables, will look kindly on this effort. I am sorry it falls outside the main province of Novum Testamentum. Still, the boomeranging of charges plays no small part in the first centuries A.D. Maybe the essay will stimulate a more systematic study of it.

1 II Samuel 12:1ff., arising out of II Samuel 11. The most recent thorough discussion I know is B. S. Jackson’s, Theft in Early Jewish Law, 1972, pp. 145ff.
3 See H. W. Hertzberg, Die Samuelbücher, 1960, p. 256: ‘Es ist nicht nötig zu
The most serious flaw has long been noticed: the absence of any hint at the ghastly elimination of Uriah. It has been defended as due to the need to keep David in the dark for the time being about the apologue’s thrust. The price, however, seems too high (I am reminded of an anecdote we enjoyed as students, with the punch-line *Das kommt noch dazu!* and it is not paid in a comparable confrontation between a prophet and King Ahab. Another solution stresses the indirectness of the murder: David, by taking care not to perpetrate it with his own hands, evaded legal responsibility. But one wonders whether, in strictness, he was any more answerable for appropriating the wife of a foreign servant. Anyhow, Nathan could have brought in the killing as morally damnable. The parable does refer to the inequality of the parties, one rich, the other poor, and even to the tender feelings in the latter’s household—morally relevant, not legally.

Were there no other major discrepancy, either of the following explanations might look plausible. One: the simile goes back to a version of the narrative where the husband was not despatched. Traces of such a version might be seen, for instance, in the fact that the punishment Nathan announced for the adultery—the king’s own wives will be raped—is readily separable from that for the murder—the child Bathsheba is expecting will die. Two: initially, the recital did go on to depict the rich man as having the poor one done to death in order to forestall his complaints. Support might be derived from David’s twofold sentence: “The man that has done this shall surely die, and he shall restore the ewe fourfold”. He shall die—for the killing; he shall be fined—for the theft.

However, another feature is almost equally disturbing and cannot be disposed of in this fashion: the rich man deprives the poor one of his treasure not because he really covets it, wants to have it for himself, but because he has to regale a traveller and is too avaricious to part with any of his own possessions. This definitely does not correspond to what happened between David and

frage, ob das Beispiel in allen Zügen auf die Angelegenheit David-Uria passt. Es genügt völlig, dass hier ein schreiendes Unrecht beschrieben wird”.

4 U. Simon’s view, quoted by B. S. Jackson, *i.c.*
5 “Yea, I nearly forgot”.
6 I King’s 20:35ff.
7 Resorted to by B. S. Jackson, *i.c.*
8 II Samuel 12:11ff.
9 II Samuel 12:5f.