
Understanding the Role of the Gebirah: Comparing 1 Kings 2 and John 2.

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Abstract

In the ancient Israelite kingdoms, the queen mother, or gebirah, played an important role in the royal court as an advisor to the king. Through a comparison of 1 Kings 2, describing Bathsheba's request to Solomon on behalf of Adonijah, and John 2, describing Mary's interaction with Jesus at the wedding of Cana, it is possible to derive principles for the ideal form of interaction between the gebirah and the king. It is argued that both Bathsheba and Solomon demonstrated shortcomings not exhibited by Mary and Jesus, and that these shortcomings contributed to the deterioration of Solomon's reign over Israel.

Keywords: Israelite kingdom, queen mother, *gebirah*, typology

INTRODUCTION

The biblical story of Bathsheba is very well known, yet only in part. The story of King David's loyal soldier Uriah and his beautiful wife, spied by the king while bathing, followed by sexual assault, an unintended pregnancy, a murderous cover-up and a dramatic confession (2 Sam 11-12; Ps 51), inspired Leonard Cohen's haunting song "Hallelujah,"¹ and even became a topic in business ethics.² Perhaps less known among the

¹ Leonard Cohen, "Hallelujah," by Leonard Cohen, recorded June 1984, on *Various Positions*, Passport PB 6045, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm.

² Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton O. Longnecker, "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders," *Journal of Business Ethics* 12, no. 4 (1993): 265-273.

general public are the details of the ways that Bathsheba was inseparably entangled with the career and monarchy of her and David's most famous son, King Solomon. Presumably after David announced that his intended heir was to be Solomon (1 Chr 23; 28), Solomon's older half-brother Adonijah claimed the kingship for himself in a nearly successful insurrection (1 Kings 1). The prophet Nathan conspired with Bathsheba to remind David of his promise that Solomon, and not Adonijah, would succeed him and to compel David to fulfill his promise. The new king tentatively forgave Adonijah, at least until the older brother attempted to secure David's virgin Abishag as his wife by asking the new queen mother Bathsheba to intercede for him (1 Kings 2). Despite promising to grant Bathsheba whatever she might request, Solomon immediately backtracked and had Adonijah killed. In this way, "the royal power was established in Solomon's hand" (1 Kings 2:25).³

The narrative of the beginning of King Solomon's reign is almost immediately followed (1 Kings 3) by his requesting a listening heart and a discerning mind from God, receiving wisdom, and exercising his new gifts in the famous story of the two prostitutes claiming the same baby. It would seem Solomon is off to a glorious start to a reign that would see him grow Israel's influence in the near east (1 Kings 5:1), build, furnish and dedicate the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 6–7), and construct his own lavish palace (1 Kings 7:1). Yet by chapter 11 of 1 Kings, the Lord "raised up" (1 Kings 11:25) adversaries to begin the work of dismantling the kingdom of Israel, breaking its political and spiritual unity.

EXEGETICAL APPROACH

No doubt, Solomon's wandering heart for foreign women and their gods played an important role in the fall from power Israel was to experience. In the present paper, an additional and

³ All Scripture quotations from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (NABRE).

possibly even more seminal reason is considered for Solomon's and his kingdom's downward trajectory: the episode (1 Kings 2:12-46) in which Bathsheba makes her request to Solomon regarding Adonijah's wish to take Abishag as his wife, and the brutal aftermath of this request. This analysis is carried out through an historical investigation of the role of the queen mother in the kingdom of Israel, and through parallels between the Bathsheba/Solomon and Mary/Jesus dyads based on Christological and Mariological typology. Synthesizing these typological ("Method A") and historical ("Method B") approaches is a hallmark of Biblical exegesis by Pope Benedict XVI ("Method C")⁴, potentially (and hopefully) leading to novel insights about the fast-moving events of Solomon's early reign. We start with Method B.

METHOD B: THE QUEEN MOTHER IN ISRAEL AND ELSEWHERE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Throughout the narratives of the kingdom of Judah (but not the northern kingdom of Israel) in 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chr, the introduction of each successive king follows a similar formula, including all or most of: the king's name, his age upon taking the throne, the length of his reign, and the name of his mother.⁵ The king's wife is not included in the formula. Inclusion of the king's mother is indicative of her important status in the royal court.⁶ Four times in the scriptural annals of the Israelite kingdoms (1 Kings 15:13; 2 Kings 10:13; 24:15; 2 Chr 15:16) and elsewhere in the Old Testament (Jer 13:18), the Hebrew term *gebirah* ("great lady") is used to denote a queen

⁴ Matthew J. Ramage, *From the Dust of the Earth: Benedict XVI, the Bible, and the Theory of Evolution* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 87-92.

⁵ K. Smyth, "3 and 4 Kings." In *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard, Edmund F. Sutcliffe, Reginald C. Fuller, and Ralph Russell (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 327.

⁶ Nancy R. Bowen, "The Quest for the Historical *Gebira*," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 4, 600-601.

mother (or grandmother), although this term is also used to indicate the wife of a queen (of Egypt; 1 Kings 11:19) or a woman of general high status (e.g., Gen 16:4, 1 Kings 11:19; 2 Kings 5:3; Ps 123:2, Prov 30:23, Isa 24:2).⁷

There is abundant historical evidence for the importance of the *gebirah* in ancient Near Eastern and surrounding societies. Andreasen⁸ summarizes textual evidence from ancient sources (art, poetry and other written records) in Hittite, Egyptian, Eblaite, Mari, neo-Assyrian, Arabian and African cultures attesting to a special role for the *gebirah* or queen mother. Throughout these varied realms, her responsibilities included assuming the interim rule of a territory immediately following a king's death, advising in political and military matters, carrying out diplomacy, and acting as an advocate to the king on behalf of their constituents. There is also strong evidence that the *gebirah* acted in the religious life of her people. Ackerman⁹ constructed an argument based on critical analyses of Biblical texts, particularly those surrounding Maacah (1 Kings 15:13), and upon archeological evidence, that Asherah might have been considered by some in Judah and Israel as a consort of Yahweh. In conjunction with the notion that kings were reflections of God (or of gods),¹⁰ a seed for the notion of a divine son of a "great lady" (*gebirah*) may have been planted that eventually took full fruition with the arrival of Jesus, son of Mary.¹¹

More practical reasons for the prominence of the queen mother also exist. Considering the prevalence of polygamy in the ancient Near East, there would often have been more than one

⁷ Zafira Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the *Gebira*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 1, 23.

⁸ Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, "The Role of the Queen Mother in Israelite Society," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 2, 182-183.

⁹ Susan Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 3, 389.

¹⁰ Ramage, *From the Dust of the Earth*, 168.

¹¹ Bertrand Buby, "Marian Studies—Scripture," *Marian Studies* 50, no. 1, 153.

queen, sometimes even hundreds (1 Kings 11:3), within a given king's reign. But a king would only have one mother.¹² It could simply have been impractical for a king to install a multitude of individuals, many of whom came from different nations and religious backgrounds (e.g., 1 Kings 11:1-8). Another factor favoring the king's mother is that she would have had a reasonable motive, as well as opportunity, to assist her son in acceding to the throne of the kingdom.¹³ In conspiring to assist Solomon's campaign for the Israelite monarchy (1 Kings 1:11-31), for example, Bathsheba was following Nathan's advice to "save your life and the life of your son" (1 Kings 1:12). While her underlying intentions are not explicitly stated, the memories of the way her previous marriage ended, and the precarious status of women subjected to "predatory behavior"¹⁴ such as King David's could very plausibly have been a traumatic reminder of her fragile position. Once Solomon's kingship and Bathsheba's appointment as *gebirah* were made real, the queen mother's newly strengthened influence would be exercised. Or would it?

BATHSHEBA TESTS THE LIMITS OF HER OFFICE

Returning to the main narrative under consideration in this paper (1 Kings 2:12-46), we see Bathsheba recognized by Adonijah, her recent political opponent, as the *gebirah*: he acknowledges to her that King Solomon "will not refuse you" (1 Kings 2:17) in his request that she act as intercessor in his gambit to be given David's nurse Abishag as his wife. Perhaps he truly loved Abishag and wished to live happily ever after with her; certainly as a prince of David's court he understood that taking a member of his late father's harem was the political

¹² Edward Sri, *Queen Mother: A Biblical Theology of Mary's Queenship* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2005), 45-46.

¹³ Christopher Naseri-Mutiti Naseri, "The Four OT Women in Matthew's Genealogy of Jesus," *Koinonia* 5, no. 2, 1-22.

¹⁴ Amber Richardson, "The *Gebirah* and Female Power," *Dialogue* 53, no. 1, 224-225.

equivalent of taking some of King Solomon's power.¹⁵ Presumably he knew, as the reader knows, where Bathsheba's loyalties lay. And knowing where Bathsheba's loyalties lie, her response is even more difficult to interpret than Adonijah's request. She agrees to ask Solomon if he might grant his brother's petition (1 Kings 2:18). Having helped secure Solomon's throne for him, Bathsheba was now in a role not only as the king's mother but in some way was the mother of her entire nation of Israel, trading her natural motherhood for a more universal type of motherhood,¹⁶ again foreshadowing Mary's motherhood of the Church.¹⁷ Having also spent much time among the royal court, Bathsheba understood that "her greatest authority sprang from her personal influence over the chief or king."¹⁸

Therefore, Bathsheba had every reason to agree with Adonijah's statement that King Solomon would grant her any request she made, even a request as "foolish and ill-fated"¹⁹ as Adonijah's. Solomon's behavior, rising to meet his mother and pay her homage, and setting a throne at his right (1 Kings 2:19) and his words "Ask it, my mother, for I will not refuse you" (1 Kings 2:20) could only have reinforced Bathsheba's expectations of a favorable response to anything she might ask. Yet, Solomon's response to Bathsheba's inexplicable request was itself inexplicable, as well as uncompromising. As pointed out by Boadt, "Above all, he [Solomon] was *decisive*."²⁰ No sooner had he promised to honor the wishes of the *gebirah* than he refused,

¹⁵ Jerome T. Walsh and Christopher T. Begg, "1-2 Kings." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 164.

¹⁶ Andreasen, "The Role of the Queen Mother," 181.

¹⁷ Mark J. Lyons, *Getting to Know Mary* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), 101.

¹⁸ Andreasen, "The Role of the Queen Mother," 185.

¹⁹ Walsh and Begg, "1-2 Kings," 164.

²⁰ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 236.

with no hint of lament like that of Jephthah the Israelite judge who tore his garments and loudly regretted his rash vow that cost his daughter's life (Judg 11:35), nor seemingly any introspection at all. Following a biting and sarcastic refusal to the *gebirah* (1 Kings 2:22) containing no acknowledgment that he had offered his obedience moments before, Solomon set about consolidating power as rapidly as Michael Corleone killed his rivals following his renunciation of Satan at his nephew's baptism.²¹

The scriptural account in 1 Kings 2:12-46 is unflinching in its description of Solomon's ruthless efficiency, bracketing the passage with: "Then Solomon sat on the throne of David his father, and his kingship was established" (1 Kings 2:12) and "And the royal power was established in Solomon's hand" (1 Kings 2:46). The ends that Solomon achieved in establishing his reign were presumably approved of by the Biblical author, given the fact that Adonijah himself said to Bathsheba, "By the Lord's will it [the kingship] went to him [Solomon]" (1 Kings 2:15) and the narrator tell us that "Solomon loved the Lord" (1 Kings 3:3). Yet the passage in 1 Kings 2 is clearly unflattering to Solomon. It is perhaps noteworthy that in several modern examples of popular Catholic commentary relating Solomon's gracious treatment to Bathsheba up to 1 Kings 2:21, his seemingly disrespectful answer in reply is left unmentioned.²² Even more scholarly Catholic sources, perhaps in deference to Mary as anti-type of the *gebirah*, skip over the parts of the narrative that

²¹ *The Godfather*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Paramount Pictures, 1972).

²² Gray and Cavins stop the narrative after Solomon sets Bathsheba upon her throne [(Tim Gray and Jeff Cavins, *Walking With God: A Journey Through the Bible* (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2018)]; Lyons (*Getting to Know Mary*, 87) simply notes that "the queen-mother... was most influential in the affairs of the country;" and Hahn even declares "Yet clearly he [Solomon] will honor her [Bathsheba's] requests" (Scott Hahn, *Hail Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God* (New York: Image Books, 2001).

might undercut positive comparisons to the Blessed Mother,²³ leaving the challenging portion of the text for a footnote, or they omit the episode altogether.²⁴ Both the caustic narrative itself and its absence from Catholic exegesis illustrate the problematic nature of Solomon's words and subsequent deeds.

IT'S ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE

On the surface, there seems to have been no negative consequences of Solomon's reply to his mother, nor of his merciless consolidation of power. The narrative after 1 Kings 2 describes Solomon's receiving and exercising wisdom (1 Kings 3; 5), building the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6–7), and his increase in earthly riches and renown (1 Kings 10:23–25). These episodes suggest that Solomon's trajectory was, to use an auto-antonym, “downhill from here:”²⁵ that is, the way became easier. Yet, we see from 1 Kings 11:14 (“The Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon: Hadad the Edomite”) and 1 Kings 11:25 (“Rezon was an adversary of Israel as long as Solomon lived” that his trajectory was, using the same auto-antonym, “downhill from here:”²⁶ Solomon's reign was becoming more challenging and difficult. Which trajectory is correct?

Whereas the narrative of Solomon's eventful rule in 1 Kings 1–11 might appear turbulent in terms of content and structure, the claim from Parker²⁷ that it exhibits a symmetrical structure,

²³ “Indeed, Solomon's words reveal the king's commitment to the queen mother's petition” (Sri, *Queen Mother*, 53).

²⁴ John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 385–430.

²⁵ Anne Curzan and Rebecca Hector, “That's What They Say: It's All Downhill from Here. Or is it?” *Michigan Public* [web page online]; available from <https://www.michiganpublic.org/arts-culture/2020-10-25/twts-its-all-downhill-from-here-or-is-it>; accessed 9 December 2025.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Kim Ian Parker, “Repetition as a Structuring Device in 1 Kings 1–11,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13, no. 42, 19–27.

is compelling. A simplified schematic of Parker's structure is as follows:

- Framing Story: Establishment of Solomon's Reign (1 Kings 1–2)
 - 1. Dream #1 (1 Kings 3)
 - A. Wisdom (1 Kings 3–4)
 - B. Business with Tyre (1 Kings 5)
 - 2. Dream #2 (1 Kings 9)
 - B'. Business with Tyre (1 Kings 9)
 - A'. Wisdom (1 Kings 10)
- Framing Story: Adversaries of Solomon's Reign (1 Kings 11)

Such a structure suggests that, much like the auto antonym “downhill from here,” the overall narrative of Solomon's reign signifies both real progress and real regression. It further can help the reader understand that while Solomon's harsh treatment of Bathsheba, the *gebirah*, and his subsequent actions indeed led to the solidification of the king's power and rule, presumably a good for the nation of Israel, they also foretold Solomon's, and Israel's, decline. Parker attributes this decline to the unyoking of Torah and wisdom;²⁸ indeed, Solomon's behavior toward his mother hardly aligns with the Torah's commandment to “honor...your mother” (Ex 20:12). Further evidence suggesting 1 Kings 2 was not simply the beginning of Solomon's glorious reign but rather the beginning of the end can also be gleaned by looking forward, through Christological and Mariological lenses (“Method A”), to a parallel interaction between Mary, the *gebirah*, and Jesus, the king, in the Gospel of John.

²⁸ Parker, “Repetition in 1 Kings 1–11,” 25.

METHOD A: 1 KINGS 2 AND JOHN 2 – A TYPOLOGICAL COMPARISON

Briefly, John 2 describes Jesus' first public miracle, when he, his disciples, and his mother Mary attended a wedding in Cana. Noticing the lack of wine, Mary matter-of-factly brought this fact to Jesus' attention (John 2:3). On the surface, at least in the English translation, Jesus' immediate response, "Woman, how does your concern affect me?" (John 2:4) seems somewhat hostile and not unlike Solomon's response to Bathsheba, although "woman" is a salutation of honor.²⁹ Jesus says his hour is not yet come, implying he does not intend to act on Mary's prompt, although Mary tells the servants at the wedding to "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). In turn, Jesus called for six stone jars to be filled with water, turning them into very fine wine (John 2:7-10). The narrative ends with John telling us this episode was "the beginning of his signs" to "reveal his glory," and that because of this, "his disciples began to believe in him" (John 2:11).

Several explicit parallels between the narratives in 1 Kings 2 and John 2 are described in Table 1. These comparisons implicate not only Solomon for his behavior during and after his interaction with Bathsheba, but seem also to incriminate the *gebirah* herself. In summary, there are clear differences in the ways Bathsheba and Mary exercised their roles as *gebirah*. It could be argued that Mary's behavior was more trusting and confident than Bathsheba's, given her more gentle manner of bringing up her request. Whereas Bathsheba's request was prefaced by the demand "Do not refuse me" (1 Kings 2:20), potentially leading to conflict if Solomon disagreed (which is exactly what happened), Mary's simple observation allowed

²⁹ W. Leonard, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ According to St. John." In *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard, Edmund F. Sutcliffe, Reginald C. Fuller, and Ralph Russell (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 984.

Jesus the freedom to respond or not, and if so, to respond however he might choose.

Nor could the sons' responses to their mothers' requests have been more different. Solomon's initial words and behavior toward the *gebirah* was nothing if not appropriate. He honored her by rising to pay her homage, gave her a throne at his right hand, and promised not to refuse her request (1 Kings 2:19-20). Moments later his attitude changed completely when the unsavory (to him) request was shared, so that Solomon immediately broke his promise to his mother. In contrast, Jesus' initial refusal (John 2:4) was not preceded by promise to grant Mary anything she desired. Further, Jesus did ultimately obey his mother's implicit request, a form of honor more concrete than Solomon's obsequious "Ask it, my mother, for I will not refuse you" (1 Kings 2:20).

One wonders if Jesus might have recalled this episode in his parable (Matt 21:28-32) of the son who at first refused his father's command to tend the vineyard, but eventually complied (not unlike Jesus in John 2), in contrast to the son who initially promised to obey, but never did as he was asked (like Solomon in 1 Kings 2). After all, Jesus told this parable at the very site of the Temple Solomon constructed (Matt 21:23), and soon after, told another parable about a wedding (Matt 22:1-14)! Perhaps these narratives and parables were connected in Jesus' train of thought.

Table 1.
Comparison of interactions in 1 Kings 2 and John 2.

Aspect of Interaction	Bathsheba/Solomon (1 Kings 2)	Mary/Jesus (John 2)
Source of initiative	Adonijah, not Bathsheba (v. 16)	Mary (v. 3)
Nature of <i>gebirah</i> 's request	Personal gain for Adonijah (v. 17)	Advocacy for the new couple (v. 3)
Form of <i>gebirah</i> 's request	Demanding (v. 20), and explicitly stated (v. 21)	Observational and implicitly stated (v. 3)
Son's initial response	Emphatic noncompliance (v. 22)	Implicit noncompliance: "My hour has not yet come" (v. 4)
Reaction of <i>gebirah</i>	Unknown; none described	Trust: "Do whatever he tells you" (v. 5)
Son's subsequent action	Intensification: Adonijah executed (vv. 23-24)	Compliance (v. 7)
Nature of son's action	Remote delegation (v. 25)	Collaborative (vv. 7-8)
Near-term outcome	"Royal power was established" (v. 46)	"Jesus...revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him" (v. 11)
Long-term outcome	Many were an "adversary of Israel as long as Solomon lived" (1 Kings 11:25)	"All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me...until the end of the age" (Matt 28:18; 20)

CONCLUSION

On the surface of the narrative about Solomon's reign over Israel, 1 Kings 2:12-46 could be viewed as an auspicious beginning.³⁰ After all, the former King David had, with

³⁰ Andre Lemaire, "The United Monarchy: Saul, David and Solomon." In *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the*

Bathsheba's and Nathan's prompting, just declared that Solomon should serve after him as king. Despite an uncomfortable interaction with the *gebirah* brought on by Adonijah's doomed request for Abishag's hand in marriage, Solomon took advantage of the situation to eliminate Adonijah and any other rivals to his rule. By the standards of Near Eastern history and politics, Solomon's swift actions could only be seen as successful, and his reign seemed to be growing in stature, power, renown and wealth.

Yet those same actions, viewed in the light of Jesus' analogous interaction with his mother Mary, flout the conventions attached to the *gebirah* in Israelite court culture. Even Bathsheba's approach to her new status lacked the altruism that Mary exhibited on behalf of preventing a new couple's embarrassment, and Mary's delicacy at broaching the topic to her son. Connecting these threads from Pope Benedict's "Method B" (historical analysis) and "Method A" (typological) into a two-pronged "Method C" (integrated approach), it is possible to view 1 Kings 2:12-46 as a warning sign indicating the troubles Solomon, and the Israelite kingdoms, would endure, until Jesus, the kingly paragon, and Mary his most faithful *gebirah*, establish their eternal reign.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper was prepared as part of the requirements for the course "The Old Testament" (Dr. M. J. Ramage, instructor) in the graduate division – Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies at St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

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