

A Comparative Analysis of the Narrative in 2 Samuel 11 and the Parable in 2 Samuel 12:1-4

Sungjin Kim
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Introduction

The story of David and Bathsheba appears twice in 2 Samuel. The first is through the narrative in 2 Sam 11, and the second is through the parable of Nathan in 2 Sam 12. The narrative is a detailed record of David's actions in chronological order. Except for the last verse, the narrative lists facts without evaluating the characters or judging their behavior. The parable of the prophet Nathan, however, shifts the narrative into another literary genre, a parable. The shift in genre involved a variety of strategies. First, by omitting much of the narrative, the parable helps the reader to distinguish between secondary and primary content. Second, by modifying some of the narrative, the parable not only prevented David from realizing that it was his story, but also gave the reader a clearer sense of the nature of the events. Third, by adding new information to the parable that was not mentioned in the narrative, the reader could focus on the characters' emotions rather than just knowing the facts.

This study examines the strategy of the text by analyzing the process of omission, modification, and addition through comparative analysis of the narrative in 2 Sam 11 and the parable in 2 Sam 12:1-4. It is beyond the scope of this study to debate whether the strategy of the text is Nathan's, the narrator's, or a third editor's. As Greg A. King said, the narrator's viewpoint appears in historical narrative, sometimes in the arrangement and in the structure of the narrative, sometimes by the words uttered by the characters, by explicit comment or by summary

statement. However, the narrator's viewpoint in the Bible reflects the divine perspective, not the thoughts of a single individual. In that sense, King said that historical narrative also intends to communicate theological truth to the reader.¹ The purpose of this study is to analyze the strategy of the text through a close reading of the text as suggested by King, and finally find the divine perspective in it.

The Narrative in 2 Samuel 11

David's Initiative

The narrative in 2 Sam 11 is a chronological account of events, all of which are driven by David. The word that most characterizes David's initiative is "sent (שלח)." In this narrative, David appears as a sender. He sent Joab and all Israel to the battle (v. 1). He sent messengers to the woman to know her and to take her (vv. 3, 4). He also let Joab send Uriah to him (v. 6). He sent a letter to Joab through Uriah's hand (v. 14), and he sent a servant to bring Bathsheba to his palace after Uriah's death (v. 27). In this way, David's being in a position to send someone indicates that he has power.² When the subject of "sent (שלח)" is a king or a person in power, and a woman is associated with this verb, it most often indicates the power of the sender. For example, in Gen 20:2, Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah. Jephthah sent his daughter away for two months in Judg 11:38. In 2 Sam 3:14, David sent a messenger to Ishbosheth and let him bring Michal back to him. Also, David sent Tamar to Amnon's house in 2 Sam 13:7.³ It is evident from these usages that the description of David as a sender indicates his power, and that the murder and adultery were the result of this power.

Another word that shows David's initiative is "took (לקח)." The subject of both "sent" and "took" in verse 4 is David, as emphasized by Richard Davidson. This demonstrates that David and Bathsheba's sexual activity was not a voluntary choice, but rather the result of power abuse.⁴

¹ Greg A. King, "Interpreting Old Testament Historical Narrative," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 154, 155.

² Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12*, vol. 75 (A&C Black, 1990), 85.

³ Anne Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond: Framing Bathsheba as a Royal Fantasy in 2 Sam 11, 1-5," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 32, no. 1 (2018), 80.

⁴ David sends "messengers" (plural), but the verb "took" has a masculine singular subject. Although many modern versions interpret it as it was the messengers who "took"

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Cheryl Exum also indicated that the two verbs which are “came (בוא)” and “return (שוב)” with Bathsheba as subjects describe a weak woman who has no initiative.⁵ The use of “came (בוא)” rather than “went (הלך)” demonstrates that David’s perspective is more favorable.⁶ Interestingly, in the LXX, unlike the Masoretic text, the subject of “come” in verse 4 is David, not Bathsheba. The MT says “she came to him” which shows the possibility to be interpreted as her own initiative. But the LXX denied the possibility of her voluntary action.⁷ The early Greek interpreter highlights that David came to her and she was a victim of the political power.⁸

Bathsheba’s silence in the narrative is another indication of David’s initiative. She had no control over the sexual relationship between David and Bathsheba. Even the statement “I am pregnant” was uttered by the agent and not by Bathsheba. In this narrative, she did not think or speak.⁹ Her silence does not mean consent. This is a defining feature of power rape. Her reaction to David’s action was completely disregarded, and her silence reveals her powerlessness.¹⁰ Therefore, it is evident from this account that David, the king, is in control of all events. He is the sole ruler, and almost everything is accomplished through his initiative.

Contrast between David and Uriah

When all the characters move in accordance with David’s command, Uriah is the only one who did not obey David. He refused David’s command for two reasons. First, the ark is on the battlefield. This fact

Bathsheba to the palace, MT unambiguously indicates that “he,” i.e., David himself (by means of the messengers), “took” Bathsheba. Richard M. Davidson, “Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 2 (2006), 88.

⁵ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub) Versions of Biblical Narratives* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 175.

⁶ Jacqueline N. Grey, “A Prophetic Call to Repentance: David, Bathsheba, and a Royal Abuse of Power,” in *Grieving, Brooding, and Transforming: The Spirit, the Bible, and Gender* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2021), 14.

⁷ Sara M. Koenig, “Make War Not Love: The Limits of David’s Hegemonic Masculinity in 2 Samuel 10–12,” *Biblical Interpretation* 23, no. 4-5 (2015), 506.

⁸ Sara M. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives* (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2018), 14.

⁹ Grey, *Grieving, Brooding, and Transforming: The Spirit, the Bible, and Gender*, 14.

¹⁰ J. Cheryl Exum, “Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 215, vol. 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 29.

shows that the war is a holy war, waged in the name of God. When going to a holy war like this, it was necessary for the soldiers participating in it to maintain their ritual purity, which included abstaining from sexual relations between men and women (Lev 15:18).¹¹ Uriah probably refused to sleep with Bathsheba for this reason. David, however, violated his obligation to maintain ritual purity and had sex with the wife of his own soldier. In doing so, the text draws a stark contrast between David and Uriah.

This contrast is also evident in Uriah's solidarity with his soldiers on the battlefield. Uriah's second reason for refusing David's command was that he believed it to be a breach of solidarity for him to come home alone to eat, drink, and lie with his wife while his lord and comrades were on the battlefield. Uriah believed that his place was on the battlefield with his comrades, fighting a fierce battle for his life, and that the king's order was an act of breaking solidarity with his comrades. Uriah's thoughts are in contrast to David, who is alone in Jerusalem after sending all Israel to war.

Thus, the text shows that Uriah, a Hittite, is more righteous than the king of Israel in terms of religious convictions and solidarity to his comrades. This demonstrates that Uriah acknowledged a higher authority than the king of Israel and had the courage to refuse the king's orders when they contradicted God's will. Uriah was removed from the narrative, however, because he disobeyed the authority. Nonetheless, Uriah's story does not end here. David, who eliminated Uriah from the story by killing him, unexpectedly encounters him in Nathan's parable.

Strategy in the Parable of 2 Samuel 12: 1-4

Chapter 11, a chronological account of the events that unfolded on David's initiative, ends with God's assessment, "The thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (v. 27). Whereas up to this point, the narrative has been a list of facts without a moral or religious assessment of David's behavior, 11:27b suggests a direct intervention by God. Chapter 12 begins with a narrative of sending: "The Lord sent Nathan to David" (v. 1). The change of sender from David to the Lord indicates a complete reversal of the power structure. David is no longer a sender. He only appears as a being who hears and obeys the sender's command. It demonstrates the emergence of a new power, the power that transcends

¹¹ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 366.

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power. This power has never before appeared in the narrative, but it now takes center stage.

God sent Nathan to David to deliver his judgment. It is unclear whether the parable was directly addressed to Nathan by God or by Nathan himself. What is clear, however, is that the text employs a variety of strategies to condense the content of the long narrative into a short parable: omissions, modifications, and additions. The following analysis addresses the text's strategies by comparing the narrative with the parable.

Omission: Uriah's Death

Uriah's death is a very important part of the narrative as a strategy for David to cover up his sin. In 2 Sam 12:9 it says that David's sin was twofold: taking Bathsheba and killing Uriah. God's judgment for those two sins was also twofold: first, the taking of his wife before David's eyes (v. 11), and second, the death of the child born between David and Bathsheba. Thus, both the narrative and God's oracle give importance to the death of Uriah.

Unusually, however, there is no allusion to Uriah's death in the parable. There is only an allusion to the loss of Bathsheba through the loss of a ewe's lamb. From this, it appears that the parable focuses on the deprivation of Bathsheba as one of David's two sins. This does not mean that the text overlooks David's sin of killing Uriah. Verse 12:9 clearly includes the killing of Uriah among David's offenses. Nevertheless, the omission of Uriah's death in Nathan's parable seems to be to emphasize that the root of all these sins is David's lust for Bathsheba. The omission of Uriah's death also prevents David from recognizing that the parable is pointing to his sin. In particular, juridical parables use a strategy of discrepancy so that the listener does not know that the parable is his/her story.¹² This strategy made David understand the parable as a legal case, and the judgment he had made immediately returned to him.

¹² According to Simon, a juridical parable contains a realistic story about a legal violation that is told to someone who has committed a similar offense in hopes that the person will unsuspectingly pass judgment on himself or herself. The offender will be caught in the trap only if he or she does not detect prematurely that the parable condemns him or her. Thus, the speaker disguises the parable as a legal case and creates some discrepancy between the parable and the offender's situation in order to trap the offender. Uriel Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb an Example of a Juridical Parable," *Biblica* 48, no. 2 (1967), 221.

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Modification 1: A Shift from Political Power to Economic Power

The narrative is based on the political power of a king. In contrast, the parable depicts the same event as a conflict between the rich and the poor. The only information provided about the parable's characters was their socioeconomic status. There are no names, tribal origins, or political positions listed. It only states that one is rich, and the other is poor. However, the rich have the power to deprive the poor of their property, just as David did. Although the parable tells the story of a single individual, it should be taken as a universal story that illustrates the state of society at the time, because an unrealistic parable can lead the audience to doubt the parable. The rich man taking from the poor without any guilt, and the poor man accepting his situation without rebellion or anger, suggests that exploitation by economic power was widespread in society.¹³

This exploitation of economic power has been evident throughout Israel's history. The Hebrew word for "the poor" (רֵשֶׁת) refers to the lowest social classes. David stated in 1 Sam 18:23 that he was too poor to be the king's son-in-law. This demonstrates the close relationship between wealth and power. Additionally, Prov 22:7 states, "The rich rule over the poor." The poor will be governed by the rich. Also, the Bible repeatedly commands power not to oppress the poor (Ex 22:25, 23:11; Lev 19:10, 23:22, 25:25; Isa 3:14, 15; Ezek 18:12, 17, 22:29; Amos 4:1, 5:11). The ideal would be to create an Israel without the poor, but this is impossible in practice (Deut 15:4, 7, 11).

This modification of political power to economic power is a device to keep David from recognizing that the parable is about him. Nathan's parable has been defined as a "juridical parable." In a juridical parable, a real-life violation of the law is disguised as a parable and told to the offender so that he will judge himself.¹⁴ Even though the shift arouses the king's anger at the unfairness of society, he does not realize that the anger will be directed at his own sin. Thus, the shift from political power to economic power seems to be one of the text's strategies to maximize the features of the judicial parable.

¹³ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), 236.

¹⁴ A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, vol. 11, *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 160.

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Modification 2: A Shift from Feeding Self to Feeding Others

In chapter 11, David committed murder and adultery to satisfy his own desires. In the parable, however, the rich man took the poor man's ewe lamb, not for his own consumption, but to satisfy the hunger of a visitor. It's hard to say for sure why this modification occurred. It is unusual for a visitor to suddenly appear in the story of the poor and the rich. Gunkel asserts that chapters 11 and 12 are independent of each other because the person corresponding to the traveler does not appear in chapter 11.¹⁵ However, this study, which focuses on the final form of the text, summarizes the text's strategies in this shift as follows. First, the appearance of the traveler reminds the reader of David walking on the roof. The word translated "visitor" or a "traveler" is *הַלֵּךְ*, which occurs twice in the Old Testament. Once in 1 Sam 14:26 where it is used to refer to "dropping honey" and the other time is here as a "visitor" to the rich man. Paul Evans explains that the text's use of *הַלֵּךְ* is intentionally an allusion to David's "walking on the roof" (11:2), which was the trigger for this incident. This strategy in the text serves to intrigue the reader with the subtle connections between the narrative and the parable. Second, this strategy serves to emphasize David's contradictions. The rich man in the parable scrupulously followed the obligation of hospitality to visitors (Gen 18:5-8; 19:3) while completely ignoring the law to love one's neighbor (Lev 19:18). He acts generously to the visitor with fare obtained by taking the neighbor's most precious thing. The rich man's behavior serves as a literary device to highlight the contradictions between David's image as a holy leader of the people and his murder and adultery.

Modification 3: A Shift from Adultery and Murder to Exploitation or Stealing

In the parable, the rich man's sin is much lighter than David's sin. According to the Law of Moses, murder and adultery are punishable by death (Ex 21:12; Lev 24:17; Num 35:30; Deut 22:22-24). However, if you stole something that belonged to someone else, you had to make restitution four or five times that amount (Ex 22:1). When David judged the rich man to "restore the lamb fourfold" (12:6), he saw this situation

¹⁵ According to Gunkel, 2 Sam 11 focuses on the murder of Uriah, but the parable does not contain a murder. Thus, he concludes that the parable originally existed independent of ch.12. Herman Gunkel, *The Folktales in the Old Testament*, Transl. by Md Rutter (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1987), 54-55.

as the same as the stealing in Ex 22:1. In this sense, the parable weakened David's sin much more than the narrative. Of course, this textual strategy may have helped David avoid thinking that the parable was his story. But at the same time, this strategy makes readers focus not on the type of sin, but the nature of the sin. David is not being judged because he committed a sin worse than stealing. Regarding the nature of sin, both are rooted in a self-centered desire, and both have grave consequences that destroy the lives of others. This idea is made clear by the verbs used to describe the two sins. The text intentionally uses the same word "took (לקח)" to indicate the sin of David and the rich man. This demonstrates that the text considers these two sins to be identical in nature.

Addition: Relational Aspect

Another strategy used in parables is to add something new that is not in the narrative. The parable focuses on the intimate relationship between the ewe lamb and its owner, which is not present in the narrative. The text says he bought this ewe lamb.¹⁶ At this point, it seems like this livestock is just a piece of property that can be bought and sold for money. Through relational activities such as eating, drinking, and lying down with him, however, the ewe lamb has become an invaluable being to him, a daughter. There has been a shift from economic to relational value, which cannot be converted to currency. This relational value never appeared in the narrative. It was only added in the parable.

It is important to focus on three expressions used to show the relational aspect of the poor man and his ewe lamb. These three actions—eating, drinking, and lying down serve to connect the two into a special relationship. The most typical example is the story of Ruth and Boaz. She ate, drank, and lay down with Boaz (Ruth 2:9, 14; 3:7). These three actions united Ruth with Boaz and he became a redeemer. Another story in which these three verbs appear together is the story of Elijah under the

¹⁶ Craig E. Morrison, *Berit Olam: 2 Samuel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 152. From a sacrificial perspective, Morrison explains why Nathan chose the little ewe lamb—noting that the ewe lamb is one of the sacrifices offered by the leper during the purification process. The ewe lamb, a sacrificial animal for expiation, foreshadows David's eventual atonement for his crimes against Uriah. As a leper washes his clothes and washes himself on the seventh day after being declared clean (Lev 14:9) and brings two male lambs and a ewe lamb as a sacrifice on the eighth day (Lev 14:10), so did David lie on the ground for seven days, wash and anoint himself, and change his clothes following the death of his child (2 Sam 12:20).

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broom tree. He asked God to take away his life. But God provided him with a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. After eating, drinking, and lying down, Elijah regained his strength and entered the mountain of God to enter into a deeper relationship with Him (1 Kgs 19:6-8). Therefore, these three actions, eating, drinking, and lying down together make their relationship special. It is interesting to note that all three verbs are used to describe the relationship between Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:11).

Also, the expression “became like a daughter” reminds readers of Bathsheba naturally. Because the Hebrew בַּת is the same as the first syllable of Bathsheba (בַּת-שֶׁבַע).¹⁷ This metaphor shifts the reader’s attention from economic values to relational values. As mentioned above, the world of this parable is a place where possession is power. It is a place where those who have more can take from those who have less. But the parable invites readers to shift their focus from economic values to relational values, an aspect that David never considered when he committed sin to satisfy his lust. He didn’t care about the grief of the man who had his wife taken from him. David was only concerned with satisfying his own desires. But the parable caused David to focus on the relational aspect of the two. As a result, he pronounced the following sentence on the rich man. “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb a fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity” (2 Sam 12:5b-6). This sentence has a clear semantic parallel.

- A the man who has done this deserves to die,
- B and he shall restore the lamb fourfold,
- B’ because that he did this thing
- A’ and because that he had no pity (2 Sam 12:5-6)

This section consists of two sins with two corresponding judgments. The sin of “taking the ewe lamb” is linked with “restore the lamb fourfold,” and “having no pity” is linked with “deserves to die.” The judgment for the rich man’s actions is that he pays back four times what he stole. This appears to be a judgment based on Ex 22:1.¹⁸ A person

¹⁷ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: B & H Publisher, 1996), 370.

¹⁸ LXX chose sevenfold instead of fourfold. Sevenfold may reflect a proverbial compensation (Prov 6:31) which means perfect restitution. Also, sevenfold might be

who steals a sheep pays back the sheep four times, and that is the end of his legal obligation. However, the lack of pity for the poor is different. It is not about the action but about the motivation of action. The act of taking the poor's ewe lamb is due to having no pity. However, this is not an official judgment of David but rather an idiomatic expression of rebuking a person who has committed a great sin. The same expression is found in 1 Sam 26:16, where David rebukes Saul's servant Abner for failing to keep Saul and said, "You deserves to die." It means Abner's sin was too great. Therefore, the death penalty here in 2 Sam 12:5 is an idiomatic judgment that reveals the seriousness of not having pity on the poor. Thus, David, who had no pity for Uriah, had pity for the poor man because he saw the relational aspect of the parable. This is the strategy of the parable, and why the text devotes the most space to describing the relational aspect of the poor man and the ewe's lamb (2 Sam 12:3).

A Change of Perspective

David, enraged at the rich man, received a shocking reply from Nathan, "you are the man." David has heard the parable from an omniscient third-person perspective up until this point. He was able to observe the close relationship between the poor man and his lamb. He could feel how cruel, inhumane, and mortally sinful the rich man's action was. However, the phrase "you are the man" allowed David to enter the parable from the outside. When he was living in the first-person central perspective, he was unaware of the emotions of others. In the narrative, David was the center of power, sending people and taking a woman. He did not care about the feelings of others. He had no pity on them. The people around him such as Uriah, Bathsheba, Joab, and other servants were nothing more than tools to use for his needs. David was, however, able to perceive the suffering and loss of others after his perspective shifted.¹⁹ He saw how deeply his sin had hurt others. As such, the parable uses the strategy of changing perspective to help David realize the seriousness of his sin.

This change of perspective is also evident in Lev 19:18 which says, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The phrase "as yourself" can

intended to call to mind "Bathsheba" because Bathsheba could mean "daughter of seven." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., 2 *Samuel*, vol. 9, The Anchor Bible, ed. William F. Albright and David N. Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1984), 299.

¹⁹ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, ed., *Andrews Bible Commentary* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 463.

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be translated in two different ways. Takamitsu Muraoka suggests that “as you (כְּמִוְךָ)” is adjectival and it should be translated “who is a person like you.”²⁰ Muraoka thought that this verse would limit the person whom you shall love to Israelites who are the “same as you.” It is because the command to love the stranger comes separately in v. 34. However, it also can be translated as adverbial; “Love (the good) for your fellow as you (love the good for) yourself.”²¹ In this interpretation, the phrase “as yourself” does not restrict, but rather expands the scope of love. In other words, this verse encourages a shift in perspective toward others. It requires individuals to listen to others, focus on their emotions, and view them as ends rather than means. In the same way that Nathan changed David’s perspective through parables, this law requires people to change their perspective.

Conclusion

David’s sin with Bathsheba appears twice, once as a narrative and once as a parable. The author employs various strategies to fit the long narrative into the short parable of verse 4, including omissions, modifications, and additions. These strategies can be summarized as follows: First, the parable omits “the death of Uriah.” This seems to be a strategy to emphasize that lust for Bathsheba is the starting point for all of these sins, while also keeping David from realizing that the parable is his story. Second, shifting David’s political power to the rich’s economic power makes David angry at the exploitation of his people. However, this anger was ultimately directed back at David himself. Third, it makes a difference in whose needs are being fulfilled. In the narrative, David committed murder and adultery to satisfy his sexual desires. In the parable, however, the rich man exploited a poor man’s ewe lamb to feed his visitor. The conflict between the obligation of hospitality and the law to love one’s neighbor (Lev 19:18) is used as a literary device to highlight the contradictory figure of David sitting on the throne pretending to be holy. Fourth, the sin of the rich man in the parable is much lighter than that of David in the narrative. This is not to defend David, but to show that there is no difference between the two in the nature of sin. Fifth, the parable emphasizes a relational aspect which is

²⁰ Takamitsu Muraoka, “A Syntactic Problem in Lev. Xix. 18b,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23, no. 2 (1978), 293.

²¹ Jacob Milgrom, “Leviticus 17–22, Ab 3a,” *Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 1655.

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not present in the narrative. It helps David to realize how much pain and hurt he caused Uriah's family. Finally, the parable helped David realize the gravity of his sin by allowing him to see the situation from a third-person omniscient point of view. Then Nathan draws him into the parable with the words, "you are the man."

This comparative analysis of the narrative in 2 Sam 11 and the parable in 12:1-4 reveals the text's strategy for bringing David to repentance. These strategies enabled David to confess to God, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam 12:13) instead of denying or overlooking his sin.

Sungjin Kim is a Ph.D. student of the Old Testament at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He is currently working on his dissertation. He graduated with his M.Div. at the same school in 2006 and dedicated 13 years to pastoral ministry in South Korea. His primary area of interest is reinterpreting the Old Testament's message in the context of contemporary life.