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A TALE OF TWO MEN IN ONE CITY

When Nathan the prophet springs the trap, and with two short words—“*Ata ha-ish*”—“You are the man,” enlightens the king, David is already inescapably caught. His anger increasingly aroused as Nathan develops the pathetic and poignant details about a callous rich man who steals the beloved ewe from his poor neighbor, David can no longer restrain himself and bursts out with a harsh judgment against the thief. Only then does Nathan let David in on the fact that the whole story was actually a parable about the king’s own offense, and that by condemning the rich man, David was really condemning himself. Of course, by then it is too late.

The parable of the poor man’s ewe lamb (*II Samuel* 12) immediately follows the famous story of David and Bat Sheva. In chapter 11 we read that “all of Israel” is away at war with Ammon, but King David himself, surprisingly, stays home in Jerusalem. Awakening from an afternoon nap, he takes a stroll on his rooftop. There he spies the very beautiful Bat Sheva bathing herself. After inquiring about her and learning that she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, he sends for her and they commit adultery. When, soon after, she sends word to him that she is pregnant, David immediately calls for her husband Uriah to return from the battlefield. The king makes two attempts to have Uriah go home to his wife, (so that it will be assumed that Uriah is the father of the soon to be born child), but to no avail. Uriah refuses each time to comply—even when under the influence of alcohol—and David resorts to desperate measures. Taking the phrase “kill the messenger” too literally, David sends Uriah with a letter to Joab, his general, instructing him to place Uriah in the forefront of the bloodiest battle so that he will, so to speak, fall in the line of duty. Uriah is indeed killed, David marries Bat Sheva after her mourning period, and it seems as if David has truly gotten away with murder. The chapter concludes, however, with the editorial comment, “But the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord.”

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The parable of the lamb, according to Uriel Simon, is one of several “juridical parables” in the bible, whose effectiveness hinges on the listener believing that he is hearing an actual case wholly unrelated to himself.¹ Only thus can he be an impartial judge. Nathan’s parable describes how, when an unexpected guest appears at a rich man’s door, rather than take from his own abundant flock, the rich man steals a poor man’s only lamb in order to prepare a meal for his visitor. Had David understood that the rich man was merely a metaphor for himself, he never would have reached such an extreme verdict: “*ben mavet ha-ish*”—the man is worthy to die. Nathan’s condemnation—“*You* are the man”—works so well because David is caught completely off guard. Once he is forced to confront the fact that his offense is really no different than the rich man’s, he is in no position to make any excuses or offer explanations.

Powerful and effective as the parable is, it is not quite as straightforward and obvious as it might seem. Many commentators, both ancient and modern, have noted the various discrepancies between the parable and the preceding story of David and Bat Sheva to which it applies. Among the most noticeable is the lack of symmetry between the two cases. Stealing a lamb in order to serve a guest is hardly the equivalent of committing adultery and then murdering to cover it up! This imperfect parallelism, however, is not necessarily a flaw. Abravanel, the 15th century Spanish exegete, explains that the disparity is actually an essential element of the parable. If David decrees a harsh verdict in the lighter case, then his verdict regarding his own, far more severe case, should be all the more harsh. The *a fortiori* argument is precisely what makes the parable so effective.²

Another difference between the parable and the event itself is the absence, in the David and Bat Sheva narrative, of a parallel to the “wayfarer” (subsequently referred to as “the guest,” and then “the man”), the character on whose behalf the rich man steals the poor man’s only lamb. Rashi and Kimhe are bothered by the fact that the parable is explicit about the rich man’s motivation for his theft—he was loath to use his own flocks in order to follow the rules of hospitality and serve a meal to the unexpected visitor—whereas in the narrative David does not act on behalf of anyone else. Both commentators quote the midrash that there is, in fact, an additional party corresponding to the wayfarer, namely the Evil Inclination. With typical sharp insight into the nature of sin and temptation, the midrash explains that the evil inclination makes its

¹ Uriel Simon, “The Poor Man’s Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable,” *Biblica* 48 (1967): 207-42.

² See Abravanel’s commentary to *II Samuel*, 12.

appearance first as a “*belekh*,” a wayfarer, dropping in occasionally, then as an “*ore’ah*,” a guest, who stays with his host over periods of time, making himself comfortable, and finally as an “*ish*,” a master who moves in permanently, taking over, forcing his host to sin.³

Perhaps the most glaring disparity between chapters 11 and 12 is the lengthy description of the care and affection the poor man lavishes on his beloved ewe, which “did eat of his own bread, drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom. . .” This has no echo at all in the previous story, which is silent regarding the relationship between Uriah (the poor man) and his wife Bat Sheva (the ewe). In fact, a case could be made that there was no great love between Uriah and Bat Sheva. After all, when David sees her bathing and sends for her, she willingly goes to him without a word of protest, (although, admittedly, it may have been impossible to deny the king’s request).

Furthermore, after David sends for her—“*va-yishlah*,” and takes her—“*va-yikabeha*,” but before he sleeps with her, “*va-yishkav*,” the verse includes the unnecessary phrase—“*va-tavo elav*,” “and she came to him.” Perhaps by giving her a verb in this sequence of actions performed by David, the text is implying some measure of complicity on her part. Had the gender of the verb-dative pair been changed, “*va-yavo eleha*,” “and he came to her,” it would have indicated that he had sex with her. The feminine structure has no such sexual connotation, yet the possibility remains that the text, by using this phrase, is subtly suggesting that she was more than a passive player in this sexual encounter.

As for Uriah, he may be completely ignorant of the affair and, despite David’s efforts, nobly declines to “eat, drink, and sleep with [his] wife,” while his comrades are on the battlefield. Uriah would then be unconsciously, and thus, from the reader’s perspective, quite effectively, criticizing David. On the other hand, Uriah may very well have gotten wind of David’s actions (David makes very little attempt at hiding the affair, sending messengers to inquire after her (v.3), and to fetch her (v.4)), and therefore deliberately refuses to go home and be a party to David’s unsavory attempt at covering up the affair carried on with his own wife. Either way, though, it stretches the imagination to believe that a man who presumably loved his wife as dearly as the poor man loved his lamb, would not go home to see her on his short military leave, especially when practically begged to do so by his king. Meir Sternberg convincingly demonstrates that each of the above options regarding Uriah’s refusal to comply with David is supported by the text,

³ *Sukkah*, 52b.

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which quite intentionally never takes a stand, allowing for both intriguing readings of Uriah at the same time: “Because of the reader’s inability to decide between the two mutually exclusive portraits, the figure of Uriah comes to operate in both directions at once.”⁴ Whatever we may say about Uriah’s motives, however, the disparity between the parable and the event remains: the parable devotes the longest and most descriptive verses to the man’s affection for his ewe, while the text is silent about Uriah’s feelings for Bat Sheva.

According to Simon, all such discrepancies in juridical parables, far from being defects, are a calculated device in order to throw the listener off the scent. For if the details of the case matched up too perfectly with the listener’s own crime, he would immediately become suspicious and be on the defensive. The discrepancies ensure the listener’s impartiality while he judges the fabricated case, unaware that it is in any way relevant to him. In other biblical parables such as the “tree and plant” parable of Jotam (*Judges* 9), and the “thistle and cedar parable” (*II Kings* 14), the listeners need not be impartial. On the contrary, as soon as they hear an opening line like, “The trees went to anoint a king over them,” it is perfectly clear they are hearing a parable about themselves, as if Jotam is saying: “You know what your situation can be compared to? To the trees that went to anoint a king. . .”

Our parable is certainly of a different type, and yet it is also not entirely similar to the other two juridical parables brought before kings in the Bible. *II Samuel* 14 relates how Joab seeks out a “wise woman” from Tekoa to help him convince David to become reconciled to his estranged son Abshalom, who fled the kingdom after he murdered his half brother Amnon. The woman is essentially an actress playing the part of a mother in mourning, and Joab is the director choosing her wardrobe and coaching her in her lines, creating a scenario which mirrors David’s. In a second parable, we read of an anonymous prophet who comes before King Ahab pretending to be a guard who lost his prisoner on the battlefield (*I Kings* 20). When the king declares that he must now suffer the consequences and pay with his life, the prophet pronounces the word of God: since Ahab had the enemy of the Lord, ben Hadad, in his hands, but “lost him”—that is, made a treaty with him—he too will have to pay with his life.

In both of the above examples, it is the “plaintiff” who brings his own case to the king, as seems to have been the norm (cf. the two prostitutes

⁴ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 208.

who complain before King Solomon). Furthermore, both plaintiffs disguise themselves, the woman donning mourning clothes, and the prophet covering his face with a veil and bruising himself, lending a sense of realism to the scene.

In Nathan's parable, on the other hand, the prophet brings someone else's case before the king, a role we don't generally see as a prophet's in biblical literature, and he certainly does not hide his true identity from David. A disguise, of course, is meant to make the deception more believable: the Tekoite woman truly looks the part of a bereaved mother begging the king for mercy, and the anonymous prophet certainly doesn't look like a man of God, but rather like an average citizen presenting his plea, hoping for a lenient judgment from the king. Nathan not only does not employ a disguise, but never even attempts to flesh out his story with concrete details such as names, places, and dates, which would also have served to lend credibility to the tale. Instead he opens with the rather vague, "There were two men in one city; the one rich and the other poor. . ." If anything, this tone is more reminiscent of a storyteller's tale or a fable than of an account of real events. In fact, Robert Alter asserts that, "given the patently literary character" of the parable with its "emphatic rhythmic" style and "almost musical" tenor, is it surprising that David is so easily taken in!⁵

Furthermore, while in the other two parables we have an equivalent (albeit somewhat less forceful) version of Nathan's "You are the man"—the wise woman says to David "Why hast *thou* continued such a thing. . .," and the prophet lifts his veil and declares God's decree, drawing the analogy between the fictitious cases and the king's situation—what is notably absent is the listener's reaction to the whole elaborate ruse. What, after all, is the point of a strongly denunciatory "You are the man" pronouncement if it is not followed by a powerful response indicating that the parable has truly struck a nerve? David catches on to the woman's tale and realizes that she is alluding to his relationship with Abshalom (perhaps after his experience with Nathan he is super sensitive to anything even smacking of a parable). He guesses that Joab was the one who put her up to it, she confesses, and although he does consent to bring Abshalom home, the end of the scene is somewhat anti-climactic. Absent is any flash of insight, any profound confrontation with a new reality. King Ahab, for his part, simply goes home after the man of God declares his punishment, "sullen and displeased." In our story, on the other hand, David is at his

⁵ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of One and Two Samuel* (NYC: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000), 257.

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most noble and impressive when the light suddenly goes on inside and he comes face to face with his awful crime. Then he courageously and unhesitatingly admits, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Succinct and to the point, his two word confession—“*Hatati la-adonai*”—directly answers Nathan’s two word accusation—“*Ata ha-ish.*”

The disguise, the play acting, and especially the absence of the listener’s declaration of guilt or any indication that the parable has hit home, all suggest that in the instances of the wise woman’s plea and of the negligent bailee, what we have is essentially a dramatic way of presenting a rebuke or a criticism before a king. Much like Saul’s tearing of Samuel’s coat, (or vice versa, depending on how you read *I Sam.* 15:27), after Saul fails to annihilate the entire nation of Amalek, when Samuel seizes on the unpremeditated act as a way to illustrate his message that “the Lord has torn the kingdom of Yisrael from thee,” these cases are visual enactments employed to drive a point home more effectively and more concretely than words alone would do. Once the scene is over, though, and the actor delivers his reprimand, he packs up and goes on his way. In none of these cases is there a strong sense that the dramatic performance leads to a significant revelation for the listener, forcing him to acknowledge something he had not considered before.

The parable of the poor man’s ewe lamb is quite different. It is more in the vein of Samuel’s somewhat tentative prodding of Saul earlier in chapter 15 of *I Samuel*. King Saul rushes to greet the prophet, full of confidence that he has fulfilled God’s command and eliminated all of Amalek, when in fact he kept Agag the king and the best of the sheep alive. Rather than directly confront Saul with his crime and punishment, Samuel takes a gentler, coaxing approach. “What means then this bleating of the sheep in my ears?” he asks. And with his further probing he slowly, deliberately draws Saul closer and closer to owning up to his crime until Saul, much like David in our chapter, finally admits, “I have sinned.” Similarly, Nathan uses the parable not just as an illustration, but as an educational tool to enlighten David and to allow him, by looking objectively at an analogous incident, to clearly grasp the fundamental nature and gravity of his own actions. Because Nathan is less interested in theatrics or deception, he does not bother with costumes or minute details. For him the purpose of telling the parable is above all to instruct; he must guide David, he must help him see things as they really are, so that David will, of his own accord, confess, regret, and repent.

Nathan’s parable, in other words, is specifically intended to produce a drastic change of perspective, and to elicit a strong reaction from David.

Now, it has already been indicated that the fine points of the parable need not match up precisely with the actual situation, and that the offense in the parable may be lighter than the one committed by the listener. It still stands to reason, however, that the underlying thrust of the parable should correspond closely and pertain directly to the listener's own situation, and not merely be loosely related. Otherwise, the inherent rebuke falls flat and the lesson meant to be learned is missed. If one reason for telling a parable is to force the responsible party to confront the true core of his crime, to illuminate its full severity, and to compel him to feel remorse and plead guilty, then certainly the essential nature of the sin must be addressed in the parable itself even if many of the particulars do not explicitly correspond. The parable of Nathan, however, does not seem to adequately focus on the true essence of David's transgression.

RE-READING NATHAN'S PARABLE

What is the underlying message which Nathan's parable, as generally understood, imparts to King David? If we pare away all of the details and embellishments, the core of the tale seems to be as follows: Like the rich man who has "very many flocks and herds," King David has a harem of wives and can presumably have his pick of any of the unmarried women in the entire kingdom. Uriah, on the other hand, has only Bat Sheva, one beloved companion, whom he cares for deeply. The extensive description of the poor man's affection for his ewe, while having no parallel in the Uriah narrative, certainly functions to arouse David's compassion, and prompts him to lash out furiously against the rich man who has everything he could possibly want, but who still, thoughtlessly, selfishly, takes from the poor man who has so very little. But could this really be the lesson Nathan is imparting to David? Is David's sin merely about the "haves" taking from the "have nots?" If we understand the parable this way, then the implication is that if David did not have so much, or if Uriah had not been so emotionally attached to Bat Sheva (and again, the text allows for the possibility that he was not), David's sin would not have been so serious. In other words, a deliberate act of adultery, followed by the murder not of just one innocent man but of many loyal soldiers along with him in order to cover up the original crime of passion, might not have been so "evil in the eyes of the Lord." Surely this cannot be what the prophet intends to convey.

It would seem that a fresh reading of the parable is in order, one where the crux of the tale itself strikes at the very heart of David's sins.

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“There were two men in one city, the one rich, and the other poor. . .” begins Nathan, and he concludes with the stinging accusation, “You are the man.” But which “man” is David? Perhaps he is *both* men.

Rather than an interpretation of the parable in which David and Uriah correspond to the rich man and the poor man respectively, perhaps these two exact opposite characters, who both dwell “in one city” should be understood not as two different men, but as two opposing aspects of a personality which reside within one and the same individual—within David. David, in the first verse of the narrative, is described (with more than a hint of criticism) as the only one remaining in Jerusalem—“the city”—and it is David, possibly more than any other figure in the Bible, who is so richly depicted in all his complex, multi-dimensional, incongruous, conflicting humanness.

On the one hand, David is the poetic soul who plays the lyre and gently soothes Saul’s irritable moods. Like other great leaders of Israel, he starts his career as a simple shepherd looking after and protecting his flock. Surely Nathan has David’s humble beginnings in mind when he portrays the poor man as someone who is so attentive to his one beloved lamb. As this young shepherd gains a reputation as a brilliant soldier, he is, nonetheless, careful not to spill blood unnecessarily. More than once he refuses to lay a finger on King Saul, even though Saul is bent on killing him and David has several golden opportunities to do him harm. He even feels remorse when, unbeknownst to Saul, he merely cuts a corner of his robe off, and he voices his regret to his men.

Ironically, though Saul spends much of his time attempting to murder David, Saul’s son Jonathan and David share a loving relationship which stands as the paradigm of devoted friendship in the bible. David makes several pacts with Jonathan swearing loyalty and loving-kindness, “*hesed*,” not just to him but to his future offspring as well. In the stirring lament at the beginning of *II Samuel*, David’s strong feelings for Jonathan are expressed most poignantly. Here he reveals himself as someone who has the capacity to feel deeply and love intensely, much like the poor man in the parable, who has such affection for his lamb that he lavishes kindness upon the animal, treating it almost “like a daughter.”

As a leader, David is someone capable of great sensitivity and concern for the welfare of the men he leads. At one point, for example, he establishes the rule that spoils of war will no longer go only to those who actually fight, but also to those who stay behind and guard the home front, for that is to be seen as an equally important role. As an individual, David can be humble and unassuming, shying away from the

rewards and honor which inevitably come his way. More than once, with the full knowledge that he has been chosen by God to be the next ruler over all of Israel, he refers to himself depreciatingly as “a dead dog,” a “flea” (*I Sam.* 24, and 26), and, significantly, using the same, less common word that Nathan uses in his parable, as an “*ish rash*,” a “poor man” (*I Sam.* 18).

But there is another, less pleasant side to David as well, one which comes into sharpest focus in the Bat Sheva narrative, although we catch many glimpses of it in earlier chapters. Here the text portrays a complacent king who stays at home while the rest of the nation is off fighting his wars. Relaxed and carefree, he takes afternoon siestas and leisurely walks, as if he has not a worry in the world. When he sends messengers to inquire after the beautiful bathing woman (the term “*va-yishlab*”—“and he sent,” with David as the subject, is used no less than six times in the one chapter), he is told in no uncertain terms that she is married to Uriah the Hittite. Without missing a beat, he sends messengers to fetch her so that he can sleep with her, not even taking precautions to keep the affair a secret from his courtiers, so confident is he that he, the king, can get away with it. Once he discovers Bat Sheva is pregnant, he never entertains the possibility of confessing, apologizing, or begging Uriah for forgiveness; instead, he tries to cover up the deed any way he can. He immediately calls for Uriah from the battlefield and (showing remarkable restraint), amicably chats with him about his welfare, the welfare of Joab and the progress of the war, and then nonchalantly suggests that Uriah go home to his wife. Uriah, as we know, declines, preferring to sleep in the doorway of the king’s house, with the servants. We can just imagine how David must have seethed when he heard of this the next morning. That night David becomes bolder, actually getting Uriah drunk, all but exploring him to return home, but again he is unsuccessful. Desperate, he finally sends Uriah back to the battle bearing his own (presumably sealed) death sentence. Cruel and cold, he doesn’t mince words: “Place him at the forefront of the hottest battle, withdraw from him so that he may be hit and die,” he writes to Joab. And let me be rid of my problem once and for all.

The swiftness with which David orders the murder of an innocent man reminds us of another story involving David and a different beautiful woman. *I Samuel* 25 recounts how David and his men are snubbed by the wealthy Naval, who rudely refuses to give them what they consider their fair compensation for serving as “a wall both day and night” to Naval’s shepherds during the shearing season. Furious at being

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slighted, David instantly commands his men to gird their swords and swears in the name of the Lord that he will not “Leave alive of all [Naval’s] people by the morning light so much as a single man!” Only because Naval’s attractive and clever wife Avigail quickly steps in and talks David out of it, does David desist from carrying out this rash and extreme massacre. In this earlier episode, where David exhibits self-restraint, God intercedes and slays the wicked Naval, paving the way for David to marry Avigail.

In our story, unfortunately, there is no intervention, human or divine, and David proceeds with his ruthless plan. As far as David is concerned, the plan is foolproof; Uriah will be out of the picture, and no one can ever trace his death back to David, who can now marry Bat Sheva. Joab, the general, however, cannot quite bring himself to abandon a soldier so brutally and deviates from the plan somewhat, with the resulting death of other soldiers along with Uriah. When a messenger is dispatched to report the multiple casualties, upon hearing Uriah’s name, David shrugs his shoulders with indifference: “The sword devours one as well as another,” he sighs. Oh well, easy come, easy go!

That this is the level to which King David has sunk is truly disturbing, and it is to this rapid deterioration in David’s character that Nathan addresses his parable. The two men in the tale represent the different sides of David—the sensitive, kindhearted side, and the callous, selfish side—and the two sides wage a battle within him. The true horror of David’s actions is that in this instance he allows the “rich man’s” personality to gain the upper hand. That he casually sleeps with a married woman without showing the slightest compunction is bad enough, but what Nathan must impress upon David is that the nature of sin is such that it never ends with just one deed. In trying to deal with the unanticipated consequences of his first crime, David is faced with increasingly complicated obstacles, until he finds himself hopelessly entangled in an unintended web of corruption. What starts with an untroubled king with too much time on his hands, ordering his servants around to fulfill his every (sinful) desire, rapidly snowballs until the man once admiringly referred to as the soldier most beloved of Israel because he “went out and came in before them” in all their battles, now, callously, orders the murder of his own faithful soldiers without batting an eyelash.

Simon rightly points out that the detailed instructions Joab gives the messenger regarding his account of the battle to David (v.18-21), serve to highlight this indifference. Joab clearly anticipated that David would react angrily when told of the unnecessary loss of men. David’s casual

acceptance of this loss once he hears that Uriah is among the dead is thus all the more shocking.⁶

Just as in the parable, where the rich man thoughtlessly takes from the poor man his one precious possession, so too the thoughtless, self absorbed side of David takes over and strips the gentle, caring side bare, leaving it with nothing. David fumes at the man in the parable, and declares him worthy to die because “he had no pity,” but of course it is David himself who has smothered all feelings of compassion and who hasn’t any pity. Though Nathan does not take great pains to conceal the true meaning behind his tale, not bothering to supply specific data, and practically giving himself away once when he describes the poor man as treating the ewe like a daughter—the Hebrew word being “*bat*,” a word rather close to the name “Bat Sheva”—it is, perhaps, not so surprising that David does not catch on. He is, by this point, so far gone, so oblivious to what he has become, so blind to his own moral failings, that he is totally incapable of seeing any similarity between the rich man’s harsh behavior and his own. Unplagued by guilt or self doubt, it would seem, he has no difficulty pronouncing judgment on the rich man, never thinking that what he did was far worse. He actually believes that he has gotten away with his crimes and that no one, not even God, will ever be able to point a finger at him. With Uriah out of the way, David can marry Bat Sheva, it will be assumed by all that the child she gave birth to was conceived after their marriage, and they will be able to live happily ever after. God, however, is not so easily fooled. “Uriah the Hit-tite. . . *thou* hast slain with the sword of the children of Ammon,” Nathan rages. David may believe that he is not a murderer, but God knows full well who is responsible, and is not concerned with the semantics of whose weapon actually penetrated the flesh!

The impact of Nathan’s words is powerful and immediate. In an instant David grasps the full weight of his actions. How easy it was to slip from being the man who valued and respected life to being the king who indifferently takes innocent lives. How imperceptible the transition was. David’s sin is grave indeed, for it is much more than adultery and murder. As Nathan insistently declares in his rebuke, David’s actions show that he has “despised the commandment of the Lord” and “greatly blasphemed” God. His behavior throughout the sequence of events reflects a moral corruption that threatens his entire character and his relationship with God. By allowing the situation to get as out of hand as it did, David has to all intents and purposes

⁶ Simon, 219.

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buried the “poor man” side of his personality. He has lost all sense of compassion and kindness and given himself over to heartlessness, arrogance, and selfishness. This haughty king who sent for a married woman when he desired her, and then sent for her husband to be murdered when he got in the way, needs to be saved from himself and reconnect with God before he spirals further out of control. And so, as David “sent” earlier, now God “sent Nathan to David” (*II Sam.* 12, 1) to tell him a parable, to make him see what he has become and to restore his moral sensitivity. As the “rich man” persona finally fades into the background and the “poor man” gains dominance once again, David accepts full responsibility and utters his unadorned confession, “I have sinned against the Lord.”