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Summary of Thesis for PhD in Philosophy

by

Dirkje Dianne Bergsma

Revisiting Bathsheba and David: A Recuperative Reading with Julia Kristeva.

In this thesis we revisit, that is reread, reexamine, analyze and reflect, with Kristeva the biblical story of Bathsheba and some of the women who are drawn into her trajectory in the narrative of David: his daughter Tamar, his ten unnamed concubines and Abishag, the companion of his old age, and their experiences with the sons of David: Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah and Solomon. The Prologue provides an introduction to Julia Kristeva and our context, premises and aims. We acknowledge with James H. Olthuis that the Bible is different from other texts, a distinction between critical history and sacred history, for its narratives are neither myth nor general, cultural history, but historical stories intended to encourage its readers in faith, and when we do justice to this intent, we can respect and honour the text even as we critically revisit it. Thus our focus is not on the politico-historical, but on the story as a faith odyssey with its message for our life stories today.

Kristeva notes that she regularly returns to the Bible and draws on it to explicate her philosophical theories, for instance, in writing on the abject, the body, and the law, Kristeva uses examples from the Levitical Purity Laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, also known to Christians as the Old Testament, regarding the imagery of ceremonial purity or ritual cleanliness as if these laws are imbedded in our psyche.

In chapter 1, *Revisiting with Kristeva: A Recuperative Reading, Across the Grain*, we address Kristeva's philosophical method, her reflections on several women in the Bible as they pertain to our reading of the story of Bathsheba. We outline Kristeva's philosophies of language,

of love and the sacred, and of the be[om]ing of a subject in the next three chapters that will frame the following two chapters of revisiting of our story. We conclude with an epilogue as we consider issues in identity formation in the narratives of our social and cultural realities.

In reading ‘across the grain’ we trace and track all the composite ‘grains’ in their textured interplay as we look for possibilities, angles, twists and turns that other readings may hide, or miss, or skew, recouping its meanings. Kristeva’s reflections on several biblical women, especially Ruth the foremother of David, show the power of the language we use, what our lexicon reveals and what it conceals. As we revisit the story of Bathsheba and David with Kristeva and note the problematic of some of its commentary we do so with an awareness of the power of interpretation based on religious and social and cultural conditioning.

Kristeva’s philosophy of language is addressed in chapter 2, *Kristeva’s Signifying Process: the Revolutionary Symbolic/ Semiotic Double Movement*. We examine the symbolic element of language because of its importance in analyzing and evaluating the words and their representations and the implications of our lexicon. Kristeva recovers the semiotic in language and this element of her signifying process is explored because of its distinct, yet equally important role in language. In examining the complexities of this story, we look and listen for the how of what is said, the emotional tone as it colors the words and fills the silences of what is not said. For language does not only have a logical denotative sense, but also a ‘deep’ connotative sense, and Kristeva calls for revolutions in how we think, speak and live our lives.

This revolution, a transformation through the power of love, brings us to *The Sacred Crossroads of Love: Between Tyranny and Delirium* discussed in chapter 3. Kristeva’s philosophy of love places us at the sacred crossroads of how love is expressed in the symbolic and experienced in the semiotic, between the tyranny of too much symbolic and the delirium of

too much semiotic. We examine love in the stories of Don Juan and of Narcissus and with Thomas Aquinas we explore the biblical commandment to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. We consider the love story of the Shulamite in the biblical *Song of Songs* who speaks of love as both lover and beloved and through her discourse establishes herself as sovereign.

We follow up on this concept in chapter 4, as we look at *Sovereignty off/for the Subject-In-Process/On-Trial*. We briefly look at the influences of Freud and Lacan on Kristeva's theory of be[com]ing a subject. Kristeva argues that our identity as subjects is always in-process/on-trial. Kristeva addresses the importance of the development of a proper place for a woman where she can experience *eudaimonia*, that is, happiness and flourishing as a speaking and loving sovereign subject who is in-process, a person in community, in interdependence with other subjects-in-process, for it embraces each one of us as unique in our similarities and our differences.

Kristeva's concepts of *chora* and of abjection are necessary to understand our discourse of identity formation. These themes and concepts form the frame and also the limit of our revisiting *The Story of Bathsheba and David: Beauty Objectified and the Abjection of the Objectifier* in chapter 5. Although the work of Julia Kristeva is well known and David is familiar to readers of the Bible, it is my assertion that revisiting this story with Kristeva can lead to multi-layered understandings of this ancient biblical narrative and give an appreciation of its current relevance and significance as it gives deeper insights into our own stories. The story begins with David seeing, desiring, and taking Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers. Yet, the trajectory of Bathsheba in the narrative of David is much more than its stories of power, sex, betrayal and violence in the ancient world. At one point in the story we are specifically told that God was displeased with what David had done (NIV 2 *Samuel* 11: 27). How we understand this

is crucial to our discernment of the narrative as it reflects and shapes our perception of God, the relationship between God and humans, and our convictions for everyday life.

The second part of the Davidic narrative is revisited in chapter 6, *An Ethical Witness to The Unethical: Toward An Herethics of Love*. Even though Bathsheba has a speaking role here, she is not central to the plot. The focus is on David, his sons Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah, and Solomon, and the prophet Nathan. Although we note their different roles in the succession narrative, our concentration will be on their ethical relations, or lack thereof, with the women in our chosen trajectory. Here we see the consequences that befall David's family as foretold by the prophet Nathan. As ethical witnesses we note power and periphery as the codes of sex and war are manifested in the family, as the women are treated as sexualized female bodies in the violence of incest and rape, as revenge and murder take place, and there is no hearing or justice for the women as they are silenced and rejected. We see how David's family disintegrates.

So we come to the *Epilogue: Into the Future: a Her(ethics) of Love Between Delirium and Tyranny*. Going beyond the theoretical of our analysis of the codes and language of sex and war, we look at sex and war crimes that are still being committed today. We look at more recent historical and socio-cultural examples of issues concerning women's struggle for identity and agency and the impact of biblical interpretations on identity formation. And we note that, in spite of the significant advances that have been made by women, Kristeva's call for revolution, for transformation, for a rebirth and a herethics of love remains unfulfilled.

But Kristeva posits a rationale behind her call for revolution, a purposeful intent in the call that we notice that beneath the many and various stories of our religious, cultural and social history, hidden tenacious and permanent aspirations of our deepest dreams and hopes lie hidden, and it is the sacred call of the search for meaning in our life-stories that beckons us. Therefore,

as we move from our ancient biblical narrative to our current stories relevant to identity formation, this epilogue is a pause rather than an ending because we anticipate a continuation of our discourse.