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The Bathing Women of the Old Testament: An Iconographical Research into the Medieval Imagery of Susanna and Bathsheba

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Something we have known since the beginning of mankind is the act of bathing. It is used to clean not only the body, but also the soul. Water has a high ritual function, especially within Christianity. The baptism of Christ is one of the most important parts of the Bible and this ritual use of water has been repeated until contemporary times. Not only Christ, but also several other men and women are mentioned cleansing themselves. Biblical stories that include the act of bathing refer to the bath as cleansing either body or soul or both. Although this theme is described in Leviticus and Numbers, not a lot of imagery can be found around these verses.¹ It seems that with the exception of Christ, men are almost never shown bathing. Also Judith's story, from the deuterocanonical books, speaks of her bathing too seduce Holofernes.² However, she is almost never depicted while bathing. The two main bathing women of the Old Testament are Susanna and Bathsheba. Where for some the act of bathing is a small part of their story, for Susanna and Bathsheba it is the most important event of their narratives. Their depiction is thus mostly while bathing.

¹ KJV: Leviticus 15, 5 And whosoever toucheth his bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe *himself* in water, and be unclean until the even. Leviticus 17, 16 But if he wash *them* not, nor bathe his flesh; then he shall bear his iniquity. Numbers 19, 7 Then the priest shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp, and the priest shall be unclean until the even.

² To learn more about Judith as one of the bathing figures from the old testament and her relationship to Susanna and Bathsheba read: Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties And The Manipulation Of The Male Gaze: What Judith Can Tell Us about Bathsheba and Susanna," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (2017): 55–72.

These women have been the topic of many discussions within the theological and art historical field. Susanna, seen as the perfect example of a pious woman, has been praised during the entire period of the Middle ages, while for Bathsheba the opposite can be stated. She has often been characterised as seductive or possibly sexual. However, when taking a look at the way the two women are depicted in the miniatures of MS M. 12, a book of hours from ca. 1500 France,³ we see both ladies illustrated in almost the exact same manner (figs. 1, 2). This seems strange. Why would two women who are interpreted so differently, be portrayed in the same way?



Fig. 1. Morgan Library MS M.12 fol. 71v ca. 1500, Book of Hours, Morgan Library, France, Tours



Fig. 2. Morgan Library MS M.12 fol. 41r. ca. 1500, Book of Hours, Morgan Library, France, Tours

Susanna especially seems to stick out like a sore thumb. Although these women are both depicted while bathing, their biblical verses are very different. Susanna appears in chapter 13 of the Book of Daniel, which is one of the deuterocanonical books. Her verses tell about a beautiful and god-honouring married woman who was attacked in her garden by two elders. By screaming and not giving in to the wishes of the elders, she honoured not only the law, but also God. During her trial where the elders tried to convict her for adultery, she was saved by the young Daniel. By an interrogation led by Daniel, innocent blood was saved that day and the Elders were given the punishment that was meant for Susanna, stoning till death.

³ In the collection of the Morgan Library, MS. M 12: f71v, f41r.

The story of Bathsheba can be found in the Bible in verse 2 Samuel 11, 12 and 1 Kings 1, 2. She undergoes a huge transformation from a silent woman desired by King David, to the mother of the king of Israel. She turns out to be a very smart and powerful woman who manages to put her son in power by petitioning David on his deathbed.⁴ As can be seen in the biblical text, Bathsheba does not speak until she mentions her pregnancy.⁵ Before she is a silent bystander adored by the king. He wants her to lay with him, even though he knows she is married and thus unavailable. We do not know the response of Bathsheba to his request. It is however clear that the deed of David is seen as a sin, since the child they conceived dies seven days after birth.⁶ The action of King David has been highlighted by many medieval scholars because David is an important figure within the Old Testament.⁷ Not to forget, Christ is a direct descendant of the king, which has great influence on his status. Christ cannot descend from a sinner and an adulterer, hence the rationalising of David's sin as a mistake or to shift the blame for his misdeeds onto Bathsheba.

Debate about the different perceptions of the story are relevant to this day. In history, the death of Bathsheba's first child was seen as her own fault, since she went with David, or possibly seduced him. This problematic interpretation has been common for multiple centuries and only found frequent resistance in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Maybe Bathsheba was unaware of being observed. Even though some scholars have accused her of provocation, feminine flirtation, of being neglectful, of yearning for a better status and perhaps of cheating.⁸ Nowhere does it state in the Bible that Bathsheba can be blamed for being observed and certainly not for having been aware that she was being watched. There is also no comment on Bathsheba's response to her summoning. Did she go willingly? Did she have

⁴ This interpretation of Bathsheba's evolution is supported by Kristine Henriksen Garroway in her article "Was Bathsheba the Original Bridget Jones? A New Look at Bathsheba on Screen and in Biblical Scholarship," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 24 (2013): 54.

⁵ 2 Samuel 11, 2–6: "And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from offhis bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house. And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child. And David sent to Joab, saying, Send me Uriah the Hittite. And Joab sent Uriah to David."

⁶ See; 2 Samuel 12, 18.

⁷ For an example see the writings of Augustine, *The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists*, translated by: Philip Schaff, *Augustin: The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatist* (Grand New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890).

⁸ Multiple scholars are highlighted, such as: Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, Gösta Ahlström, George Nicol, Randall Bailey and Lillian Klei. See: Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties": 59.

a choice to disregard David's summons?⁹ The iconography of Bathsheba has been formed mostly around the way she has been perceived.

Although both women are innocent, we see a clear distinction within their depiction. This makes the image of MS M.12 thus the more interesting. Why would Susanna, known for being pious and god fearing, be iconographically interchangeable with Bathsheba within this manuscript?

The first image of Bathsheba can be found in the Utrecht Psalter (fig. 3), dated 816–835, which is quite late when we think of Augustine already speaking of David's sin so early on in his work, "The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists." We see Bathsheba depicted with king David and Nathan.¹⁰



Fig. 3. Utrechts Psalter, 32/848, f. 29r, c. 816-835, Reims, France, Universiteitsbibliotheek Utrecht, The Netherlands

Nathan rebuking David, who in turn points toward Bathsheba. Before them lies the dead Uriah. In front of the scene the parable of the rich and the poor man is depicted, which is mentioned by Nathan during his condemnation of David.¹¹ The exact same iconography can be found on the book cover of a Psalter of Charles the Bald (823–877) (fig. 4). The ivory plaquette which adorns the cover was made between 842–869 and shows Bathsheba with a spindle and basket, which we recognise from early Maria images such as the mosaic in the Santa Maria Maggiore, next to David and Nathan. At her feet lies her dead husband, below which we see depiction of the parable of the rich and the poor man again. Noteworthy is the emphasis on David as the sinner, and not on Bathsheba. She is more of a witness than the accused. The part where Nathan comes to admonish David is clearly preferred, with extra significance to his sin given by depicting the deceased Uriah. This is interesting in combination with the change in depiction of Bathsheba.

⁹ *Ibidem*: 60–61.

¹⁰ This is the oldest examples I have found in my research which consist of almost 90 Bathsheba depictions.

¹¹ 2 Samuel 12, 1–7. Nathan draws a parallel between the parable of the rich and the poor man and the actions of David.

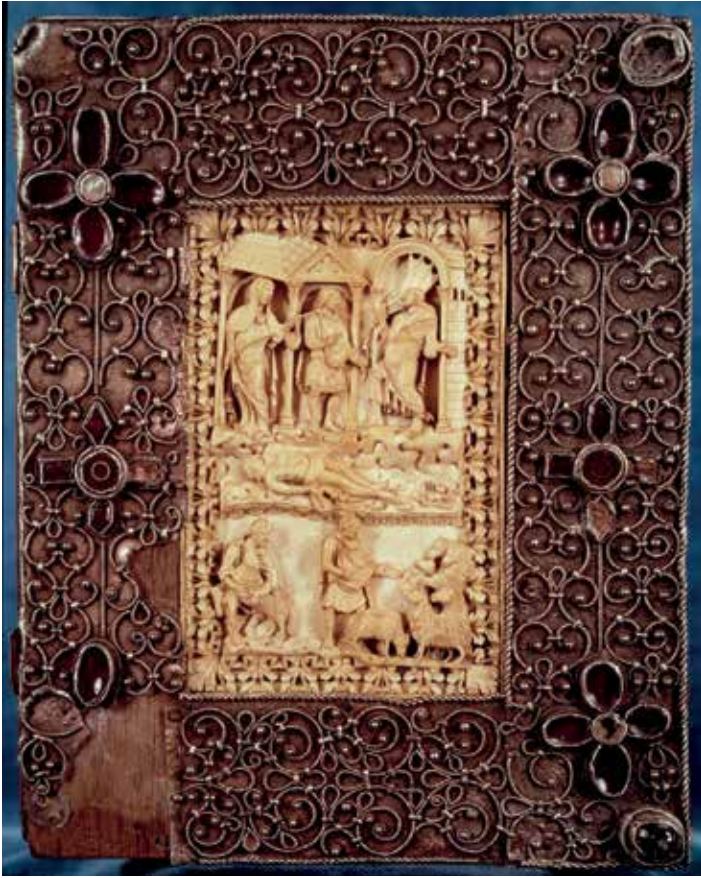


Fig. 4. Bookcover of the Psalter of Charles the Bald, 842-86, Ivory, BnF

Another psalter occurs around the same period as the Utrecht psalter and the psalter of Charles the Bald, The Stuttgart Psalter, produced between 820–830.¹² One of these miniatures is on folio 64v and depicts part of 2 Samuel 11–12 (fig. 5).¹³ On the left side we see David being rebuked by Nathan. Nathan is making a speaking gesture toward the king, who is enthroned and is also gesturing with

¹² Nowadays kept at the Württembergische Landesbibliothek. The origin of this work lays in France, just as the Utrecht Psalter. Bernhard Bischoff did paleographic research after the Stuttgart Psalter and has located it at the scriptorium at Saint Germain-des-Prés in Paris. This scriptorium was placed in a royal monastery with Charlemagne the Great as its patron. The manuscript shows up to two or three miniatures per psalm which makes it richly illuminated, with 316 images. These can be categorised into three groups: The literal, the historical and the exegetical. More information see: C.R. Dodwell, *The Pictorial Arts of the West: 800–1200* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 77–80.

¹³ This miniature is part of the Historical group. See: Dodwell, *The Pictorial Arts of the West*, 79.



Fig. 5. Stuttgart psalter, Bibl.fol.23, f. 64v, 820–830, Paris, France, Württembergische Landesbibliothek

his hands. On the right side we see two naked figures and a font with water. The female figure, crouching defensively on the ground, is Bathsheba, whom David appears to be assaulting by grabbing her breast and hair.

However, the meaning of loose hair, especially as wild and exaggerated as this, had an explicit meaning in medieval art. Tertullian has written extensively on the matter of female hair. Writing about how not just virgins, but other women as well should cover their hair unless, Tertullian says, they “were seeking some form of wicked attention.”¹⁴ He goes as far to say: “at being recognised in public, quak[e] at being unveiled, as if they had been invited as it were to rape” (3; ch. 3).¹⁵ The fact that Bathsheba is shown in this miniature with loose and wild hair could indicate that she was actually raped by King David, which is something that is also not stated in the Bible but is interesting if we are to think about how to interpret the story of Bathsheba. If she is raped in this image and the other half shows the condemnation of David, we can assume that we should see David as the sinner and Bathsheba as his victim. This is accentuated by the inscription on the previous folio, which suggest David is a sinner and should repent after assaulting Bathsheba.¹⁶

¹⁴ Bovenkant formulier

Roberta Milliken, *Ambiguous locks: An Iconology of Hair in Medieval Art and Literature* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), 59. Onderkant formulier.

¹⁵ Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian, W. Kok, *De cultu feminarum* (Dokkum: Kamminga, 1934).

¹⁶ “PSALMUS DAVID. CUM UENIT AD EUM NATHAN PROPHETA, QUANDO INTRAIT AD BETHSABEE / AMPLIUS LAUA ME AB INIQUITATE MEA / ECCE ENIM IN INIQUITATIBUS CONCEPTUS SUM ET IN PECCATIS CONCEPIT ME MATER MEA” (“Psalm for David. When

This type of image seems to be the only example of Bathsheba being raped by David. However, when taking a deeper look at the early images, all the images do seem to suggest judgement of David. Regardless whether he is or is not actually raping Bathsheba or is only being accused by Nathan, the one in the wrong is David.

After these early examples, several decades pass before Bathsheba reappears in art-work. We see the first western images of the bathing Bathsheba occurring in the eleventh century. Some early manuscripts, for example the Pamplona Picture Bibles, show us the first European examples of the bathing Bathsheba (figs. 6, 7). Saint Bruno (1032–1101)¹⁷ explains the bath of Bathsheba as the baptism of Ecclesia.¹⁸ He writes: “That is to say, according to the height of his mercy, contemplating the holy and innocent beauty of the Church as she came forth from the bath of baptism, he desired her.”



Fig. 6. Pamplona Picture Bible II, I.2.qu.15, f. 110v, c. 1200, Pamplona, Spain, Augsburg

The baptism of Ecclesia is fused with the imagery of Bathsheba in this and other examples. We often see Bathsheba in a stream¹⁹ or with a bowl that looks like a baptismal font. This would mean that the bathing images show Bathsheba undergoing baptism, which makes her bath pure and pious. But to explain David's

the prophet Nathan came to him, when he entered to Bathsheba. Wash my guilt. Indeed, iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive”).

¹⁷ The founder of The Order of Carthusians.

¹⁸ Wayne Craven, “The Iconography of the David and Bathsheba Cycle at the Cathedral of Auxerre,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians / Society of Architectural Historians* (1975): 235–237.

¹⁹ A reference to the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist.



Fig. 7. Pamplona Picture Bible II, I.2.qu.15, f. 110v, c. 1200, Pamplona, Spain, Augsburg

behavior, he must be justified; David longs for the wife of Uriah in the same way as Christ longs for the church. This is explained by Adam of Saint Victor (unknown – 1146), a poet from France:

Uriah the husband of Bersabee was slain in war against the sons of Ammon, and Bersabee then married King David himself, and was made queen (z Kings II). Thus the Synagogue, identified in Uriah, was destroyed and has died out. But the Church, signified by Bersabee, has been joined by a pact of marriage to Christ, King eternal.²⁰

This biblical explanation of Bathsheba as Ecclesia can be connected to the importance of the comparison between the eleventh century dramatic treatment

²⁰ Craven, "The iconography": 237.

of the Sponsus–Sponsa and the marriage between Christ and Ecclesia.²¹ The Sponsus–Sponsa idea derives from the Old Testament, the song of songs. In early Christianity, scholars saw a dialogue of love in the text that allegorically could be explained to be Christ and Ecclesia. In the twelfth century we see this concept gaining a pictorial form, Christ being a groom and Ecclesia his bride. They were connecting in a heavenly marriage, sometimes with the exchange of rings.²² If we apply the Sponsus–Sponsa theory to David and Bathsheba, this again would be a way absolve David of sin. Also, the interpretation of Bathsheba as Ecclesia, and thus as the bride of Christ, is presumably the reason for the iconographic representation of Bathsheba as Queen mother.

The depiction of Bathsheba as Queen mother could be associated with the Marian Devotions, instigated by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). He wrote profoundly about the virginity of Mary and of Mary as Queen of Heaven and Mediatrix.²³ In the same time period we see the formation of the *Salve Regina* by Hermann of Reichenau (1013–1054). And in the twelfth century we see Gautier de Coincy (1177–1236), a poet and musician whose main interest was the Virgin Mary. The similarities between Bathsheba and the Virgin As both were mothers and affiliated to the king of Israel, observers were quick to note the similarities between Bathsheba and the Virgin. Since David is the predecessor of Christ, we can make iconographical connections between Bathsheba and Mary. Furthermore, the depiction of Bathsheba as queen in relation to the Virgin is made explicit in *speculum* literary works later on in the Middle Ages (fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Harley 2838, f. 39r, *Speculum humane salvationis*, 1485–1509, England, British Library

²¹ Elisabeth Kurnoth-Leifels, *Über die Darstellungen der "Bathseba im Bade": Studien zur Geschichte des Bildthemas; 4. bis 17. Jahrhundert* (Essen: Bacht, 1962), 6.

²² Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 232.

²³ Graham Oppy, Nick Trakakis, *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (Abingdo: Routledge, 2014), Chapter 9: *Bernard of Clairvaux*.

Although some imagery can be found in the eleventh and twelfth century, it is during the thirteenth century that the depiction of Bathsheba flourishes. This is the time period within the Middle Ages where the most diverse imagery of Bathsheba can be found. It is however not the period with the highest production of her representation. This is during the late Middle Ages, where she is depicted in many books of hours. The thirteenth century is interesting because of its wide variety of scenes and media. She can be found in Psalters, Bibles, *speculum* literature and more. Also, her repertoire gets broader, depicting her as Queen mother, mourning David's death, bathing (dressed and naked), having intercourse with David and also petitioning him and her son Salomon.

A factor that could be seen as a catalyst for the popularisation en representation of the subject is the increased interest in the penitential psalms during the thirteenth century. Innocent III (papacy 1198–1216) orders the recitation of the psalms during Lent.²⁴ Since the psalms were written by David as a way to repent for his sin with Bathsheba, one can imagine an increase in imagery with the popularisation of the theme. This papal order probably encouraged the high production of Bathsheba imagery during the thirteenth century.

A depiction of Bathsheba, which embodies the so called double-natured woman, is that of David and Bathsheba having sex (fig. 9). David's lust drove him to call Bathsheba and have intercourse with her. The result of his actions



Fig. 9. Psalter-Hours of Guiluys de Boisieux France, Arras, MS M.730, f. 109v, after 1246, The Morgan Library, detail

was Bathsheba's pregnancy, which ended tragically, as stated in the biblical story. The reason for depicting this scene, I think, would be that if we only depict David watching Bathsheba while bathing, he seems to be engaging in *porneia*,²⁵

²⁴ Thomas J. Heffernan, E.A. Matter, *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2005), 454.

²⁵ Sexual immorality, highly focusing on adultery.

something we cannot have the important King David do. If, however, the scene makes sense if we keep in mind the fact that Bathsheba, having had sex with David, gives birth to their son Solomon, who eventually becomes king. There would be no Solomon had they not had intercourse. Of course, we know Nathan rebukes David after he had sex with Bathsheba, and David had to write the *miserere*. But the importance of their bond is placed above that of the sin.

During the fourteenth century, there is a huge decrease in the production of Bathsheba imagery. After the explosion of imagery in the thirteenth century, we see her depicted only in the *Speculum* literature and some early books of hours.²⁶ She is shown as queen mother or an otherwise important figure, so her status is kept in high regard (fig. 10).



Fig. 10. *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, M.140, f. 39r, 1380–1399, Morgan Library

In the fifteenth century Bathsheba makes a return to the stage, in a big way. She is depicted in many books of hours accompanying the psalms. What becomes clear during the late Middle Ages is the seductive and flirtatious nature of the

²⁶ The sudden decrease in interest for this theme can be explained by several occurrences in the fourteenth century. For example, the high death rate caused by the black death, which in turn fueled the hunt for witches within Europe. The writings of Thomas Aquinas, written just a century before, are one of the reasons for the increased violence against women, Marie A. Conn, *Noble Daughters: Unheralded Women in Western Christianity, 13th to 18th Centuries* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 59. He reignites the doctrine of Exodus 22, 18 “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” His work “Summa” was quoted by inquisitors to prove their theoretical and theological grounds (Conn, *Noble Daughters*, 61). The whole images of women underwent a huge transformation due to the inquisitions. This can be a reason for the limited depiction of a woman such as Bathsheba, whose story is connected with shame and misogyny.

imagery of Bathsheba (fig. 11). She is no longer a mourning widow or a queen mother. By far, the abundance of her depiction as a nude bathing woman makes clear this imagery is favored by the public. Yet, by singling out this character the interpretation of Bathsheba will be influenced. If the only depiction of her is that of a seductive naked woman, her good and powerful side will be forgotten. This of course leads to a huge change in the way she is valued as a character within the Bible.



Fig. 11. Book of Hours, France, Rouen, MS M.261, f. 61v, 1495–1503, The Morgan Library

Clearly, she has lost her role as queen and mother and as a bystander and woman who was attacked. Now she is the one who is committing the sin. But why does her depiction change?

This question can be answered by the phenomenon of the Augustinian renaissance. During the late middle ages we see a revival of Augustine of Hippo's

(254–430) works.²⁷ One of his works that is interesting in the light of this research is “The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists.”²⁸ This text is an excellent example of a text that condones the behavior of David.

He starts with the explanation of David’s undeniable attractiveness.

As regards the prophetic significance of David’s sin, a single word must suffice. The names occurring in the narrative show what it typifies. David means, strong of hand, or desirable; and what can be stronger than the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who has conquered the world, or more desirable than He of whom the prophet says, “The desire of all nations shall come?”

The text discusses the significance of David’s sin as an important introduction to justify the robbing of Bathsheba’s purity and faithfulness toward her husband and the death of Uriah. “Bersabee means, well of satisfaction, or seventh well: either of these interpretations will suit our purpose.”

Bathsheba is interpreted as someone who needs satisfaction. In combination with David’s strong desirability it already becomes clear what the writer is going to say. However, the killing of a man and taking his wife still has to be explained.

Uriah, Bersabee’s husband, must, from the meaning of his name, be understood as representing the devil. It is in union to the devil that all are bound whom the grace of God sets free, that the Church without spot or wrinkle may be married to her true Saviour. Uriah means, my light of God; and Hittite means, cut off, referring either to his not abiding in the truth, when he was cut off on account of his pride from the celestial light which he had of God, or to his transforming himself into an angel of light, because after losing his real strength by his fall, he still dares to say, My light is of God.

If Uriah is the Devil, David’s deception to kill the Hittite was the right thing to do. Changing David into a hero, instead of a sinner. But he still took a faithful wife to his bed. This is also explained by Augustine.

He puts to death the devil, whom He first entirely removes from her, and joins her to Himself in perpetual union. While we hate the sin, we must not overlook the prophetic significance; and while we love, as is His due, that David who in His mercy has freed us from the devil, we may also love the David who by the humility of his repentance healed the wound made by his transgression.

²⁷ E.L. Saak, *Creating Augustine: Interpreting Augustine and Augustinianism in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 57–80 (Chapter: *The Rebirth of Augustine*).

²⁸ Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon). This fourth volume of St. Augustin’s Works contains his polemical writings in vindication of the Catholic Church against the heresy of the Manichaeans, and the schism of the Donatists. Translation from: *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1886), “Vol. 1 The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin, with a Sketch of his Life and Work.”

The rediscovery of Augustine's text seems to have had an influence on the art world. The blame of the sin was never clearly put on Bathsheba before this time period. However, after this Augustinian renaissance, we start to see the enticing woman, who is trying to lure David towards her with her beauty. The influence of this text seems crucial to the interpretation of Bathsheba.

She becomes the image for lust and sin, which is perfectly demonstrated in MS M. 179 from the Morgan Library. We see her depicted twice within a few pages. The first time we see the naked bathing Bathsheba, on full display with her long loose hair and small perky breasts (fig. 12). David is nowhere to be seen. She and she alone is the opening image for the penitential psalms, making clear that her behavior is

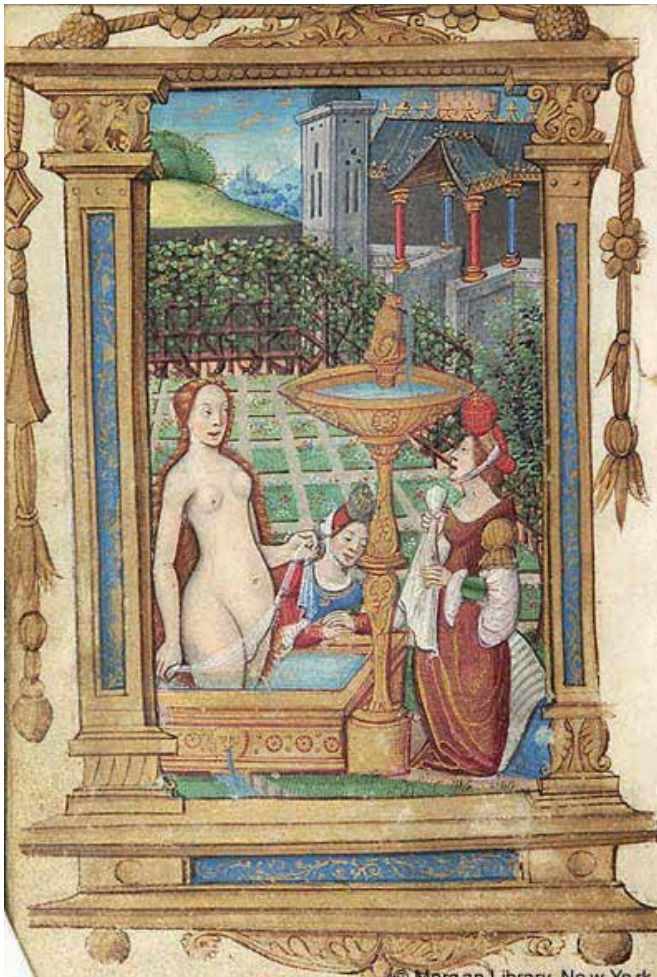


Fig. 12. Book of Hours, MS M.179, fol. 114v, France, Tours 1480–1500, Morgan Library

not acceptable. However, when actually arriving at the story of David and Bathsheba, we see her as a clothed woman, sitting alone at a pond dipping her feet into the water (fig. 13). Now we do see David looking at her from his castle. In fact, David is the main character of this miniature, being rebuked by David.²⁹ Also the



Fig. 13. Book of Hours, MS M.179 fol. 115r, France, Tours 1480–1500, Morgan Library

result of his sin, the murder of Uriah, is depicted at the bottom of the miniature. Thus, we learn that Bathsheba's story almost becomes separated from her imagery. Bathing, she becomes an isolated image, representing lust and seductiveness.

This is completely different from the Bathsheba we see within the *Speculum humanae salvationis*, depicting a queen mother, an important figure we should

²⁹ Manuscript description of the Morgan Library of Ms M. 179, <https://tiny.pl/dl1jf>, accessed on 2 February 2020.

look up to (fig. 14). The impression is conveyed that Bathsheba is split into two people, the young woman who is tempting and flirtatious, and the mother and queen, who is strong and resolute.



Fig. 14. *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, M.385, f. 39r, 1440–1460, Bruges, Belgium, Morgan Library

When thinking about who was able to look at these images, we can see different types both having their own weight. As a queen mother, she is placed in churches and *speculum* literature. Her positive aspects are projected to the public, but always in a broader sense, not for the individual. Of course, a *Vita Christi* would be read by an individual, but the usage of the book was mostly for creating sermons, for the masses. On the other hand, she is used as a warning about lust and adultery. With her half-naked body she is clearly depicted as a seductive woman. However, the negative aspects of Bathsheba seem to be more prominent in the more personal works, such as the book of hours that was made for personal devotion and reflection. But also, sculptures of her as an undressed woman must have created a feeling of fear for the public (fig. 15), knowing she had to atone for her sins. Nevertheless, the depiction of Bathsheba in more private works is by far the much more common.

Returning to MS M. 12, the depiction of Bathsheba makes sense in the medium and time period of its creation. However, Susanna is still the odd one out. The first known images of Susanna can be found in the early medieval period, to which I will refer to as the period of early Christianity, dated between ca. 30–325.³⁰ The Susanna depictions are mostly found in catacombs in Rome, on the walls or on sarcophagi (figs. 16, 17). The images are thus placed in a funerary context. During early Christianity we see several biblical stories gaining popularity within the funerary tradition, such as Daniel in the lion's den, Noah and the Ark, and Jonas and the whale.

³⁰ Dates derived from the ministry of Jesus Christ until the first council in Nicaea.



Fig. 15. Sculpture, Saint-Marie-Madeleine basilic, 1100–1149, Vézelay, Burgundy, France



Fig. 16. Fresco of Susanna and the Elders, third-century Greek catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, Italy



Fig. 17. Sarcophagus of 'Chaste Susanna', c. 340, Stone, Sant Feliu, Girona

Susanna is among these stories, which are all connected to salvation. In early Christianity, the parable of Susanna was added to the *Commendatio animae*, the prayer for the dead, known in western Europe from the third century onwards.³¹ The prayer is recited during a faithful Christian's final hours. Old testament figures such as Moses, Abraham and Daniel are addressed during these prayers by the agency of their connection to redemption and salvation.³² Susanna is mentioned as follows: "Libera, Domine, animam servi tui (ancillae tuae), sicut liberasti Susannam de falso crimine" ("Deliver, O Lord, the soul of Thy servant, as Thou didst deliver Susanna from her false accusers").³³

The themes of justice and salvation become clear from the prayer. Susanna is placed between other figures of the old testament who are saved, assuring safe passage for the deceased whose soul has to be saved, too. After the fourth century a period followed where no images of Susanna were made, or at least, they have not survived. It is not until the ninth century that Susanna returns. This period corresponds with the rule of Charlemagne the Great, when there was a revival of interest in the Roman Empire and early Christianity.³⁴

The Susanna Crystal of Lothar II is an exquisite example of this revival, with a diameter of 11.5 cm and featuring engravings of more than 40 figures, this quartz is an extraordinary object from the medieval period (fig. 18). The parable of Susanna



Fig. 18. Lotharius II crystal (Susanna crystal), ninth century, Rock Crystal, The British Museum

³¹ Kathryn A. Smith. "Inventing Marital Chastity: The Iconography of Susanna and the Elders in Early Christian Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, 1 (1 January 1993): 3.

³² Full version of *commendatio animae* (in dutch) via "Digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren", <https://tiny.pl/dl1jj>, accessed on 28 January 2020.

³³ *Ordo Commendationis Animae (Recommendation of a Soul Departing)*, <https://tiny.pl/dl1j4>, accessed on 28 January 2020.

³⁴ For more information on this topic, see Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne the Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

is depicted in eight scenes, relating the story of Susanna and the Elders in clockwise order, ending at the centre of the crystal. The reason for this iconographical choice is still unclear. Three possible interpretations of the Susanna parable are given. She can be a symbol of Ecclesia, of chastity, or the crystal is an example of right judgement.³⁵ Susanna as an example of right judgement is a well-known interpretation for the story of Susanna in general.

Archbishop Hincmar of Reims (806–882), cites the Susanna parable with regularity in juridical context.³⁶ Not only does he use the parable of Susanna to emphasise fair judgement, he also affirms the rights of women.³⁷ The fact that he uses Susanna as an example for these comments tells us the importance of her story within legal affairs and women's law. This affirms her depiction on the Lothar crystal.

We see painted examples of Susanne vanishing after the catacomb paintings in the early Christian period. However, we do see an example from the high middle ages occurring in the Lower Rhine area around 1150. Susanna was depicted on the vault of a Chapter house in Brauweiler (fig. 19). The location of this imagery might be interesting for this research, since a Chapter house was a place where justice was exercised.³⁸



Fig. 19. Susanna: with Elders (Susannah nimbéd), 1140–1160, Chapter House, Vault, Neder-Rijn, Brauweiler

³⁵ Genevra Kornbluth. “The Susanna Crystal of Lothar II: Chastity, the Church, and Royal Justice,” *Gesta* 31 (1992): 27–28.

³⁶ V.I.J. Flint, “Magic and Marriage in Ninth-Century Francia: Lothar, Hincmar and Susanna” in *The Culture of Christendom: Essays in Medieval History in Commemoration of Denis L.T. Bethell*, ed. Marc Meyer (London: Hambledon, 1993), 70. Flint refers to several texts of Hincmar where he has found references to the Susanna parable in his writings.

³⁷ Mentioned in Hincmar’s *De Divortio* and *De Coercendo*. I used information and translations from: Stone, Rachel and West, Charles, *The divorce of King Lothar and Queen Theutberga* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 83–323 (Chapter: *Hincmar of Rheims’s De divortio*). Rachel Stone, “The Invention of a Theology of Abduction: Hincmar of Rheims on Raptus,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60, 3 (2009): 433–448

³⁸ For more information about the use of the Chapterhouse within the Middle Ages, read: Heidrun Stein-Kecks, “Nutzungen des Kapitelsaales” in *Der Kapitelsaal in der mittelalterlichen Klosterbaukunst: Studien zu den Bildprogrammen* (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2005), 92–105. Specific information about the Chapter house in Brauweiler can be found in Uwe Bathe, *Der romanische*

Her connection with judgement keeps reoccurring in art during the medieval period, for instance within the *Physiologus* (fig. 20). Although the depictions look similar to the iconography of the catacomb paintings, a new element of the



Fig. 20. 10066-77, fol. 141v, *Physiologus*, 900–1050, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Origin: Mosan

scene of the fall of Adam and Eve occurs. The way Susanna and Adam and Eve are depicted suggest that they are to be compared to each other. The subject could be the importance of making good choices. Susanna chose to be chaste and was rewarded with her absolution. Adam and Eve made the wrong choice, and were expelled from paradise. The text above confirms this idea; it states:

Kapitelsaal in Brauweiler: eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme seiner Architektur, Bauskulptur und Malerei (Cologne: SH-Verl., 2003).

About stones who carry fire. On a certain mountain in the east, there are stones who carry fire. They were called “terrobuli” by the Greeks: they are male and female. When they are far apart, the fire is out. But when the female body came close to that of a man, the fire in them is lit, which makes everything surrounding the mountain burn. That’s why, man of God, you who follow this way of life, should stay away from women, so you will not, when you meet, light the twin flame inside of you, and destroy all the good things Christ gave to you. Because there are angels of Satan who fight the justice, not only holy man, but also pious women. After all, Samson and Joseph were both seduced by women. One conquered, the other was conquered. Eve and Susanna were tempted, but Eve went along with it, Susanna conquered by being wary. So all holy precepts must be strengthened toward women, because through their sins from the beginning of time – that is, from Adam to now – disobedience rages in / through the sons.³⁹

The depiction of Susanna and Eve is explained in the text, using Susanna as the example of a pious woman. It is interesting to see how the miniaturist chose to depict Susanna and Eve. Where Susanna could have been depicted as a nude, just like Eve, the decision was made to portray her fully dressed. This of course connects with the moral of the images, Eve as the seducer and fallen woman, Susanna as the pious and wise woman.

During the late Middle Ages we see the depiction of Susanna mostly in meditational books such as psalters and books of hours. The inclusion of Susanna in books of hours increases from the fifteenth century onward. However, M. 253 is the first book of hours to depict Susanna as a nude. The manuscript originates from France, was produced somewhere around 1480, and is also called Queen Margret’s prayer book. It was probably executed for Jean III Bethune (ca. 1450–1511), whose combined coat of arms are found on f. 242r and 249v.⁴⁰

Here we see Susanna depicted nude and with her hair loose, and being touched by an elder. Her holy status is signified by a halo, whereas the lack of one on the elder makes it clear that he is in the wrong. A similar iconography can be observed in the miniature in manuscript H3 from the Morgan library. This prayer book, like the Queen Margaret prayer book, originates from France. We can see Susanna portrayed in a bath, with her arms crossed over her breasts, hiding her nudity. Again, the halo behind her head indicates her holiness, and right behind her is a tree, giving us the feeling we are in a garden. It seems Susanna is always depicted as being very modest, especially if we compare her to the other bathing woman of the Old Testament, Bathsheba. Although many artworks portray both Susanna and Bathsheba bathing, a deeper look points out their differences. When considered in the textual context, these women stand in contradiction to one another. One,

³⁹ Translation of the *Physiologus* text was given to me by my fellow student Sebastiaan van Daalen.

⁴⁰ Manuscript description from The Morgan Library, <https://tiny.pl/dl1jb>, accessed on 11 November 2019.

a pious woman who was attacked by two elders, cried out for help and was saved by Daniel. The other is a married woman who was lusted after by the king and was raped, only to have the child conceived from this act, die. The only thing in common is the fact that they are spied upon by men during their baths. Although their stories are divergent, their representations are not, which seems connected to the bath. They not only look alike, sometimes their representations are practically identical. In each case we see a woman in a bath whose vulnerability is emphasised by her naked body. The act of bathing precedes what is about to happen to them. This makes the nakedness of Susanna and Bathsheba, combined with the act of bathing, the indicator for the rest of their stories.

This is the indicator for the rest of their stories. MS M. 12 shows Bathsheba and Susanna in the same way, portrayed almost identically. They are distinguishable only by their surroundings, which also lays out the story line of the biblical verses.

The actual difference between these two stories is the real person of interest, the figure who is the main character of the book of the Bible that these women play roles in. In Susanna's story, we are actually interested in Daniel who saves her. Susanna's story is the thirteenth chapter in the Book of Daniel, a chapter that was added later on. Her parable is used to accentuate Daniel's greatness. The story of Bathsheba is all about David. The Book of Kings speaks about David's acts and greatness. Bathsheba is a dark page in his story. Whereas Daniel saves a pure and good woman because he is a pure and good man, David is tempted by a woman and acts on his desires. This is difficult to reconcile, since David is the ancestor of Christ. A way to make his sin seem less intense is to imagine Bathsheba to be a temptress, whose appearance is a visual reminder of Eve (figs. 21, 22). However the image may be interpreted, we know it is focused on the sin that David can commit at any moment.

Thus, the goal of portraying Bathsheba is to illustrate the sin of David.⁴¹ So why does this change into the sin of Bathsheba? It seems like there is a thin line between the message and the spectator. One could suggest Bathsheba's beauty is necessary for other men to understand David's sin. However, this conflicts with the depiction of Susanna, the pious wife who was indeed beautiful but was also respected. Her beauty is not meant to justify the actions of men. So, it is clear that although both women are seen as beautiful, Bathsheba is blamed for flaunting her beauty.

The work *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles du Chevalier de la tour Landry* has often been regarded as the text that changed the interpretation of Bathsheba.⁴² Forgotten however, is that it also mentions Susanna, but without the negative connotation. These women are treated differently while being depicted the same way. It conveys the impression that these women depict good and evil, Susanna

⁴¹ Kurnoth-Leifels, *Über die Darstellungen der "Bathseba im Bade,"* 12.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 16.



Fig. 21. Book of Hours, France, Rouen, MS M.144, f. 23r, 1490, The Morgan Library

Fig. 22. Book of Hours, France, Rouen, MS M.144, f. 57r, 1490, The Morgan Library

being the good, bathing and being assaulted, but not engaging in the offer of the Elders and Bathsheba being the bad, not “resisting” the request of the king⁴³ and by doing so breaking her marital bond with her husband Uriah. This idea of good and evil is emphasised in MS M.12 where Susanna is depicted with a nimbus, whereas Bathsheba is not shown with a nimbus. This is an important dissimilarity between the two women, indicating their different status to the public.

Susanna’s iconography seems to be fairly one-dimensional. She is the embodiment of a pious and chaste woman and wife. Her salvation seems to be the most important part of her persona, together with her embodiment of right judgement.

Bathsheba however, has shown an incredible amount of layers within her personality. She starts out as a quiet bystander. Later, she moves toward a more hybrid role, being depicted as the Queen-mother and the wife of David. Here she is a respected woman and an important figure for the genealogy of Christianity, since her son and husband are the ancestors of Jesus Christ himself. On the other hand, she can be depicted as a temptress, bathing (almost) fully naked in the garden of King David. She catches the eye of the king, and sometimes stares back at him, knowing she is being observed in an improper way. This seductive side of Bathsheba is crucial to the way she is understood, since she doesn’t speak within this biblical verse. Her body is used to speak, and we see the depiction of a flirtatious woman. This makes her complicit to the event following her bath. She becomes

⁴³ We of course do not know if Bathsheba resisted or not, since she has almost no voice in this verse.

pregnant with David's child, which leads to the killing of her husband Uriah and eventually the death of her the newborn baby. Within these consequences we also see the change in the depiction of Bathsheba.

She is presented as ever-more seductive in the portrayals of her bathing. This has to do with the importance of David's role in the Bible and for the people of Israel. He can't be a sinner, since he is the progenitor of Christ. Shifting the blame to Bathsheba is the easy thing to do. This is exaggerated in the books of hours, where she is placed at the beginning of the penitential psalms. By placing a miniature depicting Bathsheba on the starting page of the psalms, we are reminded that these verses were written because of her.

The peak of Susanna's depiction was during the early Middle Ages, hidden in catacombs. These spaces were not meant for a daily visit and weren't very accessible. The books of hours however, where incredibly popular in the late Middle Ages. Here we see the zenith of Bathsheba's depiction history.

Bathsheba shows us a widespread but also layered imagery. She is known as the seducer as well as the queen mother, since her son Solomon is king of Israel is Israel. In *speculum* works she is compared to the Virgin and is also depicted as the mourning widow of David. This complex personality is what makes Bathsheba so fascinating, but also makes it easy for her to be misinterpreted.

Susanna and Bathsheba are clearly linked together in their depictions, making them look almost identical within the books of hours. However, this creates the problem where each woman could be said to be as seductive as Bathsheba or pious as Susanna. This is why I would like to propose that they are meant as opposites, with Bathsheba representing evil and Susanna representing good. Susanna screamed when she was attacked, in accordance with the law, and trusted in God to save her. Bathsheba didn't speak and thus words are put in her mouth. This together with the fact that she has to take on the burden of being evil in order for David to not be tainted by sin, eventuates in a Bathsheba who while bathing is depicted as the incarnation of evil. However, she is her reputation changes later on, when she is the mother of the future king.

So their connection resides in their depiction rather than in the interpretation of them. They may look the same, but they are actually used as a juxtaposition, creating a dialogue of good and evil.

SUMMARY

Something we have known since the beginning of mankind is the act of bathing. It is used to clean not only the body, but also the soul. Water has a high ritual function, especially within Christianity. The two main bathing women of the Old Testament are Susanna and Bathsheba. Whereas for some the act of bathing is a small part of their story, for Susanna and Bathsheba it is the most important event of their narratives.

These women have been the topic of many discussions within the theological and art historical field. Susanna, seen as the perfect example of a pious woman, has been praised during the entire period of the Middle ages, while Bathsheba has often been characterised as seductive, or possibly sexual. However, when looking at the way the two women are depicted in the late Middle Ages, we see both ladies illustrated in almost the exact same manner. Why would two women who are interpreted so differently, be portrayed the same way?