DAVID REBUKED BY NATHAN

- **Theme:** David rebuked by Nathan. When Nathan is sent to rebuke David his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

- **Keywords:** David, Nathan, Bathsheba, Old Testament, Christian Iconography, Middle Ages, Late Middle Ages

- **Summary:** This story narrates the moment when Nathan rebukes King David his adultery with Bathsheba made worse by the assassination of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. At the beginning of the story, Nathan approaches David and tells him the parable of the rich man and the poor man. In this parable, a rich man took away the only ewe lamb that a poor man had so that he could feed it to a traveller, even though he had plenty of sheep and cattle of his own. After David heard this story he burned with anger and he said that the rich man should be punished. Nathan said to him that he was that man. And after that God said to him (through Nathan) that the sword would never depart from King David’s house, and that the child that he had with Bathsheba would die on the seventh day after his birth.

- **Attributes and types of representation:** The iconography of this story is usually represented in the visual arts with a repentant King David standing, kneeling, or seated in his throne, and an accusingly Nathan standing. Nevertheless, other figures were also incorporated during the Middle Ages such as an angel, the allegory of repentance (Metanoia), and Bathsheba. The angel and the allegory of repentance only appear in artistic representations in the Byzantine Empire, while Bathsheba is common to the Eastern and the Western traditions. These figures were incorporated even though they were not mentioned in the textual sources.

- **Primary sources:** The story of David rebuked by Nathan appears in the Old Testament and it is narrated as follows:

-2 Samuel 12: 1-19: The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.” Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.’“
‘This is what the Lord says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.’” Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Nathan replied, “The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.” [...] (From Bible Gateway, http://www.biblegateway.com, last accessed 7th of May, 2010).

- **Other sources, non-written sources:** There are non-written sources that could have influenced the creation of this iconography. This episode is not related to any liturgical event that could have had an impact on its development.

- **Geographical and chronological framework:** According to Katheleen Corrigan, the iconography of David rebuked by Nathan could have its origins in early Christian cycles which could have survived in several copies in the Eastern and Western European traditions such as in the Byzantine Psalter of Chludov or the Carolingian Psalter of Utrech.¹ The Utrech Psalter, created between 816 and 835 in the monastery of Hautvillers in Reims, is probably the oldest manuscript that has survived with this iconography in the West.² This iconographical cycle influenced other manuscripts that were produced in the Carolingian Empire (Metz), in England (Canterbury), and in France (Paris) between the 9th and the 12th centuries. Later on in the 13th century, this iconography appeared in the Morgan Bible created in Paris, and after the 14th century in many Books of Hours and Psalters found in France, Italy, Spain, etc. In the Byzantine Empire the first example of the iconography of David rebuked by Nathan can be found in the Chludov Psalter created in the 9th century. Other examples such as the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus and other Psalters created between 879 and 883 continued the same iconographical tradition. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 this iconography disappeared in the East.

- **Artistic media and techniques:** David rebuked by Nathan has been most widely represented in manuscript illumination, especially in Psalter and Bibles, and in sculpture, with sporadic examples in other artistic media.

- **Precedents, transformations, and projection:** The image of David seated on his throne, or standing, listening to the accusations of Nathan, also standing, can be related to Greco-Roman images of a dialogue between a seated figure and a standing figure, or two standing figures.³ The basic typology of this composition is very similar to that of David rebuked by Nathan and it can be considered to be its iconographical origin. Once this origin has been established any variation done to this iconography has to be directly sought in the Bible, Christian exegesis, or in Christian practices. In this sense, when in the East David appears kneeling in front of Nathan it is representing the visualization of Byzantine confessional practices. The first examples of this iconography started to appear in the 9th century in the East and the West, and the figure of Bathsheba was already included in both. Her presence in these manuscripts has been explained by Louis Réau as

the source and origin of the evil that befell King David.\textsuperscript{4} It is also possible that her presence responds to the beginning of the Psalm 51 that usually accompanied these manuscripts. In the Byzantine Empire, David rebuked by Nathan was usually conflated with the story of King David in Penance, which allowed for the inclusion of Metanoia (the allegory of repentance) in the shape of a woman.\textsuperscript{3} An angel is also included in this scene placed behind David. His presence has been explained as the hand that will execute the will of God.\textsuperscript{6} After the 13\textsuperscript{th} century these variations disappeared and only the image of David kneeling or seated on this throne facing an implacable Nathan remained until the 16\textsuperscript{th} century.

- **Typology and related themes:** The story of David rebuked by Nathan is not associated to any prefiguration in the Christian typological system.

- **Images:**
  - David rebuked by Nathan. The Parable of the rich man and the poor man. Book cover of the Psalter of Charles the Bald. Metz. 9\textsuperscript{th} century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 1152.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., p. 324.
\textsuperscript{6} Butchthal (1938), The Miniatures of the Paris Psalter..., pp. 27-30.


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