

SUSANNA AND THE ELDERS

Theme: Susanna and the elders.

Keywords: Susanna, Elders, Judges, Nude, Bath, Christian Iconography, Old Testament

Summary: In Babylonia lived a man named Joachim, who was married to a beautiful woman who was fearful of God called Susan. Joachim was a wealthy bourgeois and had a big house with a garden. As a respectable member of the community, many Jews congregated in his house. Among the Jews who visited the house of Joachim were two old judges. When visitors came to the house of Joachim, his wife, Susanna, went for a walk to the garden. Seeing her every day walking about, the two old men began to desire her. At first neither knew of the secret desires of the other, until one day when both left the house and then met again when they returned to the house of Joachim to spy on Susanna. Both confessed to their lustful desires and agreed to seek an opportunity for both of them to be alone with the young Jewish girl. One day Susanna went to the garden as usual, unaware that the old men had hidden in her garden to spy on her. As the day was very hot, Susanna decided to take a bath and sent her servants to bring her oil and soap and told them to shut the garden gate. When the servant left, the old men came out of hiding and harassed the girl saying that if she did not acquiesce to their lustful desires both will testify against her saying that she had been unfaithful to her husband with a young man. Susanna refused the old men and was put on trial where the two elders testified against her as they had said. The old judges sentenced her to be stoned. While on her way to her punishment, Susanna asked God for help. The young Daniel stopped them all saying that Susanna was innocent. After talking with the old men separately, Daniel discovered that they were lying. In the end it was they who were sentenced to death.

Attributes and types of representation: In the beginning the story of Susanna was represented in iconographic cycles with episodes of Susanna bathing or Susanna harassed by the elders, the trial of Susanna, Daniel saving Susanna and the conviction and death of the elders. Later on, among these themes the most represented was the bath of Susanna, although unlike Bathsheba bathing, Susanna is usually represented with a nimbus. Considered a saint since the beginning of Christianity, Saint Susanna of Babylon may also appear alone holding a book.

Primary sources: Susanna's story was composed in the first century BC and it was included as a apocryphal interpolation to the Book of Daniel.¹ It is an uplifting story with no historical foundation. This story was never thought to be divinely inspired and therefore was excluded from the canon of the Jewish Bible. According LaCocque, there is another explanation for this exclusion and that is that the rabbis considered reprehensible the perversion of the venerable judges and they alleged that their conduct discredited the Jewish people.² Therefore, relying on the doubtful historicity of the story the rabbis decided to remove it from the canon. However, the Church Fathers and Christian apologists of the early centuries, such as Origen,³

¹ Louis Réau (2000), *Iconografía del arte cristiano. Iconografía de la Biblia. El Antiguo Testamento*, Ediciones del Serbal, Barcelona, pp. 449-453. See also Erika Bornay (1998), *Mujeres de la Biblia en la pintura del Barroco: Imágenes de la ambigüedad*, Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid, pp. 125-126. See also Dan W. Canton (2003), "Dating the Story of Susanna: a proposal", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 34(2):121-140.

² André Lacocque (1990), *The Feminine Unconventional. Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, pp. 28-30.

³ Origen (ante A.D. 254), "To Africanus 5," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers IV*, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., (1994), Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., p. 387.

Irenaeus of Lyon,⁴ Hippolytus of Rome,⁵ Cyprian of Carthage,⁶ or Cyril of Jerusalem,⁷ defended the canonicity of the story of Susanna. Finally, Jerome of Stridon included it at the end of the Book of Daniel in the Vulgate, thus becoming one of the Deuterocanonical documents.

- Book of Daniel 13. Susanna's story can be read at <http://uscgb.org/nab/bible/daniel/daniel13.htm> (accessed March 25th, 2011).
- Cyprian of Antioch, *Ordo commendationis animae* (second century): *Libera, Domine, sicut ejus liberasti Susannam de falso crimine*. Which translates as: "Receive, O Lord, the soul of your servant, deliver it from all dangers like you delivered Susanna from the false accusation."⁸

Non-written sources: There are no oral traditions or religious popular practices that influenced the creation of the iconography of Susanna. The story of Susanna is not associated with any liturgical program either.

Geographical and chronological framework: Susanna was already an iconographic subject in Early Christian art. Cyprian of Antioch included Susanna in the prayer for the commendation of the soul, or *Ordo commendationis animae*, composed in the second century.⁹ This prayer influenced the symbolism of the art of the catacombs and this is the first place where the representation of Susanna can be found. In the Greek Chapel in the Catacombs of Priscilla (third century) in Rome, Susanna is represented in prayer between the two old men who accused her. She is also depicted in a fourth-century funerary sculpture, the sarcophagus of Arles, France, which gathers all the scenes of her story in a narrative cycle. A glass bowl from the fourth century with the figure of Susanna praying was also found in Cologne, Germany. Although no iconographic examples of Susanna have been found from the fifth to the eighth centuries, it is possible that they existed but were lost to us now. The imagery must have been well-rooted since it reappeared in a cameo created for the Frankish king, Lothair II, in the ninth century in Aachen, Germany. In the tenth century, Susanna can be found in the Bible of Saint Isidore of León, Spain. In the eleventh century, her iconographic cycle appears in the Bible of Roda in Spain and in the thirteenth century in a Book of Hours in Bamberg, Germany. In addition, in this same century Saint Susanna appears again in the Bible of Clement VII created in Bologna, Italy. From this point on, the representation of Susanna's bath will begin to be represented more frequently. Susanna's bath was then represented in a Bohemian (Prague?) Bible of the thirteenth century and it continues to be represented in many manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries throughout Western Europe.

⁴ Irenaeus (A.D. 180), "Against Heresies" in *Ante-Nicene Fathers I*, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., (1994) Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., p. 497.

⁵ Hippolytus *Commentary on Daniel* (A.D. 204) in *Ante-Nicene Fathers V*, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., (1994) Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., p. 191-194.

⁶ Cyprian, *Testimonies 20* (ante A.D. 258); in *Ante-Nicene Fathers V*, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., (1994) Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., p. 540

⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* (A.D. 350) in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Serie 2,VII*, (1995) Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, p.123.

⁸ Réau, (2000), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 450.

⁹ Ibid.

Artistic media and techniques: The iconography of Susanna and the Elders is represented in numerous artistic media created with different techniques such as frescoes, sculpture, luxury arts, illuminated manuscripts, glass, textiles, etc.

Precedents, transformations, and projection: Susanna's story combines two motives that can be found with many variations in universal legends: the motive of the innocent woman who is calumniated and the motive of the precocious wisdom of a child.¹⁰ Réau mentioned that the etymology of Susanna in Hebrew means "daughter of lilies", and so she became the symbol of chastity because of her name in popular thought. This association, along with her presence in the garden, can relate Susanna to Eastern fertility female deities, such as Ceres or Demeter in the East, or deities such as Flora or Pomona in the West. At first, as mentioned before, the figure of Susanna was represented as an example of the desire for the salvation of the soul of the deceased in Early Christian art.¹¹ During this period Susanna is also represented in allegorical form with a lamb between two wolves or in an orant position. In addition, during this time Susanna is also beginning to be represented as the symbol of the Church, harassed by the Jews and Pagans (both symbolized by the Elders). From this time and almost to the thirteenth century, Susanna will appear in iconographic cycles that narrate her story. For medieval theologians and jurists, the absolution of Susanna, or Saint Susanna of Babylon, was an example of Justice.¹² This idea is reflected in the cameo of King Lothair II of the ninth century, an object meant to be seen in court, where the story of Susanna was used to illustrate the functioning of justice.¹³ This interpretation will also have an echo in the late Middle Ages, where the story of the chaste Susanna began to decorate town halls where justice was administered by the court of aldermen.¹⁴ However, from the fourteenth century onwards, the image most widely depicted would be that of Susanna in the bath being spied on by the two old judges. That is, Susanna loses her sacred character as a figure similar to the Virgin Mary for her purity, and as a symbol of the Christian Church, moving from a moral and religious meaning to a sensual and pseudo-secular one.¹⁵ Her nude figure, like that of Bathsheba, will decorate private manuscripts such as the Book of Hours. However, it is noteworthy to point out that, unlike Bathsheba, Susanna is portrayed with a halo to highlight her purity despite the erotic connotations of the subject. From the sixteenth century on, Susanna loses the halo completely. For Renaissance artists, Susanna is just a nymph spied upon by two lewd fauns. Her popularity reached its highest point in the Baroque, but even today one can still find contemporary examples of this iconography.

Prefigurations and related themes: Susanna does not appear within the medieval typological system and therefore she is not prefiguration of any New Testament figure. In Early Christian art, Susanna is always the symbol of the saved soul. Later she became, like the Virgin, in the symbol of the Church and the two elders that calumniated her became the image of the Jews and Pagans. The chastity of Joseph (chaste Susanna's resistance), the Bath of Bathsheba

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bornay (1998), *Mujeres de la Biblia en la pintura del Barroco*, p. 127.

¹² Réau, (2000), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 451.

¹³ Genevra Kornbluth (1992): 'The Susanna Crystal of Lothar II: Chastity, the Church and Royal Justice', *Gesta*, 31, pp. 25–39. For a different version of the function of the cameo see Valerie F.L.J. Flint (1995): "Susanna and the Lothar Crystal: a liturgical perspective." *Early Medieval Europe*, 4: 61–86.

¹⁴ Réau, (2000), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 452.

¹⁵ Bornay (1998), *Mujeres de la Biblia en la pintura del Barroco*, p. 127.

(Susanna's bath) and the Judgment of Solomon (the trial of Daniel) are related themes to the story of Susanna and the Elders.¹⁶

Images:

- Susanna (small fragment). Pieces of a glass bowl. End of the 4th century. Cologne, Germany. The British Museum.
- Story of Susanna. Camafeo de Lotario II (artes suntuarias). Siglo IX. Francia. Museo Británico.
- Story of Susanna. *Roda Bible*. 11th century. Spain. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Latin 6 (3), fol. 66.
- Story of Susanna. *Book of Hours*. 13th century. Bamberg, Germany. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M.739, fol. 18v.
- Susanna. Bible of Clement VII. 13th century. Bologna, Italy. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Latin 18, fol. 302v.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Biblia*. Bohemia or Praga, Czech Republic. 1391. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M.833, fol. 186v.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Bible Historiale*. Guiard des Moulins. 14th century. France. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 156, fol. 231.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Confort d'ami*. Guillaume de Machaut. Siglo XIV. Paris, France. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 9221, fol. 93
- Susanna and the Elders. *Prayers to the Saints*. Ca. 1420-1425. Germany. London, The British Library, Ms. Egerton 859, fol. 31.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Postilla in Bibliam*. Nicolaus de Lyra. Ca. 1480. Troyes, France. Troyes, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms. 129, fol. 13v.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Book of Hours*. Ca. 1480. Paris, France. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M.253, fol. 248r.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Fleur des Histoires*. Jean Mansel. 15th century. France. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 55, fol. 111v.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Book of Hours*. Ca. 1495-1505. Tours (?), France. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M.12, fol. 71v.
- Susanna and the Elders. Ivory comb. 15th century. France. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.
- Susanna and the Elders. *Book of Hours of Anne de Montmorency*. 1549. France. Chantilly, Musée Condé, Ms. 1476/1943, fol. 40.

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¹⁶ Ibid., p. 450.

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