

# Surrounded by Wolves: A Reparative Visual Criticism of Susanna (LXX Daniel 13) in Text and Early Christian Art

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## Abstract

This article is located at the intersection of text and image and proposes a reparative visual criticism (RVC) of the story of Susanna and the Elders found in Daniel 13 (LXX). As one of the earliest narratives depicted in early Christian art, the story of Susanna and the Elders forms part of a system of sepulchral iconographical themes which reassured early Christians suffering persecution with a promise of spiritual deliverance. Yet such visual exegesis only addresses the theological understanding of the text. This article explores the multilayered interpretations of Susanna through a variety of visual interpretations of the narrative in catacomb art and reflects on the text in the contemporary South African context, focusing on Susanna's sexuality, shame, silence, and violence perpetrated against her. This approach is threefold. First, didactic visual interpretations of the narrative will be explored as representing the internal struggles of the early church regarding married female sexuality. Second, the allegorical representation of Susanna as a lamb will be investigated by engaging in contemporary feminist criticism regarding Susanna's silence and shame in the text. Third, a South African contemporary discussion explores how the allegorical representation of Susanna as a lamb enters into a discussion with Judith Mason's artwork *The Blue Dress*. The RVC method allows for a thorough exploration of the gender-based violence Susanna experiences and highlights the relevance of the narrative for past, present, and future readers/audiences.

**Keywords:** Susanna and the Elders; early Christian art; South African context; sexuality; feminist; gender-based violence; reparative visual criticism



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## Introduction

The narrative of Susanna has throughout history been one of the most popular and reproduced narratives outside of canonical biblical texts, from various versions of the text in different traditions, to her appearance in countless artworks over the centuries, including dramas, poems, and compositions.<sup>1</sup> There has always been a type of intrigue with Susanna and the countless scholarly works on the topic attest to this. Various approaches have explored the text as commenting on Jewish/Christian relations, as addressing theological ethics,<sup>2</sup> and the symbolic role of Susanna as martyr, wisdom, virtue, and chaste victory over *porneia*.<sup>3</sup> In feminist biblical scholarship, attention is placed on the gender politics of the narrative, the power struggles evident in the text, and the role of the male gaze—especially in art historical studies.<sup>4</sup> Yet while the multivalent scholarly work on the Susanna narrative attests to the ambiguous nature of both text and the protagonist, Susanna, and the popularity of the subject matter for analysis, serious attention has not yet been given to the study of the text or its reception in the contemporary South African context.

This article aims to contribute to the scholarly work on Susanna, particularly within a South African context, by exploring the multilayered, ambiguous nature of Susanna through the relationship between text and image to show how images, both ancient and modern, may illuminate a text and aid in exploring female agency within the text.<sup>5</sup> This will be done by means of reparative visual criticism<sup>6</sup> and takes place on three levels which signify a history of textual and visual analysis, namely a first level of textual exegesis and visual didacticism, a second level which explores allegorical interpretation, and a third level which is a textual and visual analysis in a contemporary setting which may challenge traditional readings of the text or illuminate an approach which has not been considered. In the application of this method in the current article,

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- 1 Nicole Tilford, “Susanna and Her Interpreters,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Westminster: SPCK, 2014), 679.
  - 2 Chris L. de Wet, “The Reception of the Susanna Narrative (Dan. XIII; LXX) in Early Christianity,” in *Septuagint and Reception*, ed. Johann Cook (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 231–233.
  - 3 De Wet, “The Reception of the Susanna Narrative,” 242–243.
  - 4 Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (London: Routledge, 2018).
  - 5 This article is adapted from a conference paper presented at the New Testament Society of Southern Africa 2024 conference hosted by the Gender and Sexuality Subgroup under the theme “Violent Texts, Violent Interpretations, Violent Contexts.”
  - 6 Reparative visual criticism (RVC) is a methodology developed by the author as part of the fulfilment of a PhD study at King’s College London. RVC is a form of visual exegesis adapted from Cheryl Exum’s approach to women in the biblical text. While it does contain elements of reception criticism, RVC is primarily concerned with viewing the text through the lens of visual art, critiquing traditional patriarchal readings of the text in an effort to aid in new readings of the text which focus on those who have historically been overlooked based on gender, race, class, or disability. RVC is also tasked with repairing the previous patriarchal and androcentric interpretation of the text and the modern reader’s relationship to the text through the aid of contemporary art, reimagining voices in an act of remembering.

the narrative known as Susanna and the Elders will be explored. First, on a primary level, the history of the interpretation of Susanna as an exemplar for early Christian married women will be summarised with a focus on how the narrative informed debates on sex and sexuality. Here the seminal work of Kathryn A. Smith is key to understanding the Susanna narrative in the early Christian period. Second, a lesser-known allegorical visual interpretation of the story of Susanna and the Elders as a lamb surrounded by wolves will be explored to discuss a secondary level of visual criticism, one which may allow for a feminist exploration of Susanna's oft critiqued silence and the element of shame present in the text. Third, the narrative is explored in a contemporary South African setting through an artwork by Judith Mason, exploring how two women from different centuries may illuminate one another and give way to a reparative reading of the text, reflecting on the violence women in South Africa have historically faced.

### Brief Textual History

The narrative of Susanna and the Elders is found in LXX Daniel 13:1–64.<sup>7</sup> It is not regarded as part of the original Masoretic Text but is thought to have been a short story that was added to Daniel during the second or first century CE.<sup>8</sup> Scholars such as Catharine Moore note that Susanna and the Elders, along with two other narratives (the Priests of Bel, and The Dragon) and two additional prayers (the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews) were Judaised secular folktales which circulated independently before being included in the book of Daniel.<sup>9</sup> The narrative is found in two versions, namely the Old Greek (OG) (dated 135–100 BCE)<sup>10</sup> which is 46 verses long and placed at the end of Daniel, and the Theodotian (Θ) version of 64 verses which replaced the OG in popularity in the late second century and is found at the beginning of Daniel.<sup>11</sup> It is Theodotian's version that Jerome's Vulgate edition preserved, and which is found in most English translations today. Chris de Wet<sup>12</sup> notes this development, with scholarly consensus being that the narrative had undergone significant redaction and revision. The narrative's inclusion in the book of Daniel is

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7 Translations from both the Theodotian and the Old Greek text are from NETS; see R. Timothy McLay, "Susanna," in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint: And the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title*, ed. Benjamin G. Wright and Albert Pietersma (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

8 Tilford, "Susanna and Her Interpreters," 679.

9 Catherine A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1977), 88–89; Nicole Tilford, "The Greek Book of Daniel," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Westminster: SPCK, 2014), 627.

10 Susanna Drake, *Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 62.

11 De Wet, "The Reception of the Susanna Narrative," 230–231.

12 De Wet, "The Reception of the Susanna Narrative," 230.

based on content, with Nicole Tilford<sup>13</sup> and Catherine Taylor<sup>14</sup> suggesting that the narrative, like much of the content of Daniel, reflects the anxiety of the Jewish community in the Babylonian diaspora as they struggled to adjust to increasing Hellenistic influences. Similarly, Karina Martin Hogan<sup>15</sup> notes the rise in popularity of novelistic literature, of which Susanna and the Elders form part, during the Hellenistic period among Jewish authors and readers. This can be seen in other examples of Jewish novels, such as Esther, Tobit, and Judith, where there is a particular interest in female characters and their sexuality.

The basic narrative remains the same in both versions: it is a story about false accusation, divine intervention, and righteous vindication. In short, Susanna, a wealthy Jewish woman in Babylonia (though the Theodotian version does not mention her Jewishness), is spied on by elders of the community in her garden where she was bathing. After refusing their sexual advances, the elders falsely accuse her of adultery, and she is arrested the next day. At her trial, the prophet Daniel vindicates her and instead the elders are punished for their lies.

## The Text and Visual Art

The popularity of Susanna and the Elders during early Christian development is reflected by her appearance in both early Christian writings and sermons and sepulchral art. At least five catacombs<sup>16</sup> and four sarcophagi<sup>17</sup> from Rome depict the parable of Susanna. The earliest amongst these, a three-scene fresco in the *cappella Greco* (“Greek chamber”) of the Priscilla Catacomb, dated to around 250 CE, visually portrays the narrative: scene one interprets the public accusation of Susanna by the elders, scene two shows the intervention by Daniel, and scene three shows both Susanna and Daniel in an *orans*<sup>18</sup> pose.

On a primary level exegesis, these visual interpretations are didactic and place focus on the important elements of the text, namely on the accusation, trial, and exoneration. The

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13 Tilford, “Susanna and Her Interpreters,” 679–680.

14 Catherine C Taylor, “Educated Susanna: Female Orans, Sarcophagi, and the Typology of Woman Wisdom in Late Antique Art and Iconography,” in *Studia Patristica*, ed. Markus Vinzent, Volume XCII (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 340.

15 Karina Martin Hogan, “Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Benjamin H. Dunning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 288.

16 Catacombs of Callistus, third century CE; Catacombs of Pricilla, ca. second century; the catacomb of Saints Petrus and Macellinus; Catacomb of Praextextatus, major catacomb in Rome, ca. 300 CE.

17 Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus, ca. 270 CE; Sarcophagus of “Chaste Susanna,” ca. 340 CE.

18 A common iconographic depiction in early Christian Art, the *orans* translates as “one who is pleading or praying” and is often a figure (male or female) with their hands lifted upwards. A well-known example is the third century fresco of a woman with a head covering in the Priscilla catacombs. See Dale Kinney, “Petition, Prostration, and Tears: Painting and Prayer in Roman Catacombs,” *Religions* 15, no. 7 (2024): 767.

context of the frescos and sarcophagi as sepulchral art along with Susanna's inclusion in the *Commendatio animae*, "the commendation of the soul"—a third century prayer for the dying in Western ritual which petitions 13 biblical figures of which Susanna was invoked specifically as an example of salvation from false witness—has left most scholars to focus on the interpretation of Susanna in relation to salvific purposes.<sup>19</sup> Yet other scholars such as Kathryn Smith have reanalysed the Susanna material and argue that while Susanna is related to a salvific message, she spoke more specifically to the place of the married person in paradise and became a typology for the early Christian woman, an argument substantiated by the writings of the early church fathers.<sup>20</sup>

### Primary Visual Interpretation: Susanna, Sexuality, and the Early Church

During the period of early Christian development, a time during which Christian imagery appeared in previously predominantly Roman catacombs, there were quite a few questions with regard to the married household's place within Christianity. The early Christian view that virginity was a spiritually superior state to marriage as presented in the teachings of Jesus and Paul, raised questions regarding the place of the married person within the cult and in salvation. Jesus's debate with the Sadducees on marriage in Luke 20:34–36 portrays a radical view on the subject. Smith argues that the idea that celibacy was essential to spiritual salvation is implicit to the statement.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Paul recognises the threat that *porneia* poses and out of concern for the spiritual, endorsed marriage as the only acceptable possibility open to those who could not sustain celibacy.<sup>22</sup> To those converts who were already married, Paul also upheld the legitimacy of the existing social institution of marriage (1 Cor 7:10–11). After all, Paul's mission was to the gentiles and owed most of its success to the support of formerly pagan, upper-class, married couples. Smith<sup>23</sup> notes that much of the pastoral literature in the first generation after Paul was written with this group in mind. As such, the married household as the largest component of Christian society needed to be assured of a place within the Christian framework for Christianity to grow and succeed.

An important component of this household, the wife, can be understood as a vulnerable link within this component and as such provisions were set in place to regulate marriage and sexual activity. In the Roman Empire, marriage was a private act entered into with the mutual consent of both parties and was monogamous and independent of religious jurisdiction with the goal of producing legitimate heirs and citizens of Rome.<sup>24</sup>

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19 Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 27, 36, 78.

20 Kathryn A. Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity: The Iconography of Susanna and the Elders in Early Christian Art," *The Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1993): 3–24.

21 Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity," 5.

22 Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity," 5. See also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

23 Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity," 5.

24 Marlena Mazur, "Family and Pro-Family Politics in Ancient Rome," *Forum Teologiczne* 19 (2018): 172; Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity," 4.

Therefore, for the upper-class Roman, marriage was a civic duty and, in fact, a legal obligation beginning with the Lex Julia in 18 CE, and conjugal pleasure was an inherent good which served both parties.<sup>25</sup> Judicial regulations of sexual activity were primarily concerned with marriage, adultery, and concubinage—activities which had a direct impact on social status and inheritance. A man found guilty of *stuprum*—having intercourse with an unmarried, free woman or a widow—risked losing property and social position while a woman was punished severely. Pressures other than the judicial played a role. Excessive sexuality and uncontrolled passion were considered signs of loss of self-restraint. Men who tolerated their wives’ promiscuity and did not immediately denounce them publicly had permitted their private affairs to jeopardise the public order.<sup>26</sup>

The narrative of Susanna was particularly popular because it addresses the concerns of the married household regarding anxiety around sexuality and its relation to salvation while also addressing the fear of adultery and the threat that sexuality posed to the public order.

The earliest representation of Susanna in the Greek chamber shows how visual representation of the narrative reflected these concerns. The figure on the left wall of the chamber depicts the public accusation and condemnation of Susanna and conflates two separate events from the text (see Figure 1). The day after the elders failed to coerce Susanna,<sup>27</sup> she was called before the community, and the elders presented their false accusations. First, they ordered Susanna to unveil herself in order to “sate themselves with her beauty” (v. 32). Then, as a prelude to their testimony, they “laid their hands upon her head.” The conflation of these two acts, which represent sight and touch, was particularly relevant to contemporary debates around sexuality and salvation.

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25 Mazur, “Family and Pro-Family Politics in Ancient Rome,” 172–173.

26 James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 45–46; Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 39; Smith, “Inventing Marital Chastity,” 4.

27 According to Jewish legal definitions of rape, the narrative of Susanna does not qualify but is rather considered sexual coercion or sexual blackmail. Yet Susan Brownmiller’s critique of patriarchal definitions of rape demonstrates a crime committed towards a man, not the woman, as such traditional classifications are useless in understanding and recognising the woman’s experience. See Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 2015), 8.



**Figure 1:** The Judgement of Susanna (ca. 250 CE). Painted plaster, 5411 x 3875 mm. Greek Chapel, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Rome, photo no. Pri, C, 41, a).

The focus on Susanna’s veil and its discarding is particularly interesting. Tertullian cited Susanna as an example of wearing a veil in chapter four of his treatise *The Crown*, explaining that she wore a veil out of choice, wanting to hide her disgrace and out of fear of pleasing the elders.<sup>28</sup> Tertullian wrote extensively on women’s dress and cosmetics, and considered women to be responsible for men’s sensuality. Elsewhere in his treatise *The Veiling of Virgins*, Tertullian links the senses of sight and touch:

She must necessarily be imperiled by the public exhibition of herself, while she is penetrated by the gaze of untrustworthy and multitudinous eyes, while she is tickled by pointing fingers, while she is too well loved, while she feels a warmth creep over her amid assiduous embraces and kisses.<sup>29</sup>

To a third century contemporary viewer then, the Priscilla catacomb image of the unveiling of Susanna followed by the elders not only placing their hands on her head as a sign of condemnation, but also gripping her bare arms on either side, resonates with anxiety surrounding unveiled women, male sight, and sensual touch.

The second scene on the right wall of the Greek chamber (see Figure 2) shows Daniel’s intervention and the elders’ testimony. After the first figure, the text follows that Susanna was condemned by the elders and the community, and in response “Susanna cried out in a loud voice to God, who was the only witness to her innocence” (LXX vv. 42–43). Appropriately, Susanna is portrayed as an *orans*—the personification of faith and the human soul—with both hands raised in prayer which was common in Jewish, Roman, and Christian culture of the time. The *orans* is usually depicted wearing the dress and *palla* (or head covering). The elders on the right point accusingly to Susanna

28 Tertullian, *The Crown* 4.3 (ANF 1/3:3).

29 Tertullian, *The Veiling of Virgins* 14 (ANF 4:14).

and to the garden to the left, signifying the place where she usually bathed. On the left also is the figure Daniel, listening in the crowd and who will intercede on her behalf as he receives divine inspiration because of her faithful cry to God.



**Figure 2:** Susanna Accused (ca. late second century). Painted plaster, 4980 x 3598 mm. Greek Chapel, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Rome, photo no. Pri, C, 40).



**Figure 3:** The Liberation of Susanna (ca. late second century), Painted plaster, 5400 x 3996 mm. Greek Chapel, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Rome, photo no. Pri, C, 42, b).

The final scene depicts Susanna and Daniel after her exoneration. A scene which is not found within the text, both Daniel and Susanna are portrayed here as *orans* figures, giving thanks to God.<sup>30</sup> Appearing alongside the scene of Susanna's condemnation, the

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30 Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity," 9.

theme of sight and touch once again comes into play. Here, the lack of touch between Daniel and Susanna is noticeable in comparison with the elders, with Smith<sup>31</sup> arguing that there is an absence of the implication of *porneia*. Unlike the elders, Daniel as a righteous man is not moved by the sight of Susanna but rather recognises her as virtuous and chaste—linking these two figures as the ideals of faith and chastity. Together, Daniel and Susanna represented the ideal Christian follower. Clement emphasised this idea in the eight books of his *Stromateis*, a blueprint for the married lay Christian based on faith. Clement writes of Susanna as an example of the Christian woman’s duty in fighting against pleasure: Susanna “in surpassing modesty, going even to death condemned by licentious admirers, remained the unwavering martyr of chastity.”<sup>32</sup> Smith<sup>33</sup> notes that the Roman bishop Novatian (ca. 250 CE) was the first to connect Susanna to marital chastity. In *On the Discipline and Advantages of Chastity 4*, Novatian draws on Tertullian but allows for compromises based on moderation and creates hierarchies of chastity based on Paul: “Chastity maintains the first rank in virgins, the second in those who are continent (the widowed who subsequently renounced sex), the third in the case of wedlock. Yet in all it is glorious, with all its degrees.”<sup>34</sup> Novatian viewed Susanna as the ideal of self-restraint for all women, and through his compromise of considering the life of the married, sexually active Christian he assured their place in paradise.

Yet the early interpretations of Susanna in the Greek chamber is ambivalent with regard to Susanna’s innocence and virtuousness. Smith<sup>35</sup> argues that later interpretations of Susanna focused on her physical and spiritual integrity while still addressing the concern of the married person’s place in paradise. This was done by manipulating one of the most familiar themes in Christian art—the *orans* in paradise.<sup>36</sup> This was usually a female *orant* centred between two trees, representing the praying soul, or piety, in

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31 Smith, “Inventing Marital Chastity,” 9.

32 Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.19 (ANF 1/2:431).

33 Smith, “Inventing Marital Chastity,” 11.

34 Novatian, *On the Discipline and Advantages of Chastity 4* (ANF 1/5:587-592).

35 Smith, “Inventing Marital Chastity,” 30.

36 Catherine Taylor fully explores Susanna as the *orans* in paradise in connection with the typology of Woman Wisdom in late antique iconography; see Taylor, “Educated Susanna.”

paradise.<sup>37</sup> The representation of Susanna and the Elders in one of the chambers of the Major Catacomb (c. 300 C.E.) in Figure 4 illustrates such an example.



**Figure 4:** Susanna among the Elders (ca. 300 CE) Painted plaster, 6070 x 3680 mm. Lunette of the arcosolium of the Susanna Crypt, Major Catacomb, Rome (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Rome, photo no. Mag, D, 23).

Here Susanna is wholly inside her garden, with the elders on either side, one crouching on the left and the other standing on the right. Susanna is portrayed as an *orans*, crying out to God. This scene is doubly appropriate, since according to Deuteronomy 22:23–24, shouting for help is the correct response for a woman in the case of an attempted sexual violation—a fact that Susanna was aware of because the Theodotian texts makes it clear that she was taught in the laws of Moses.<sup>38</sup> The visual interpretation also compounds the narrative, recalling at once the different aspects of the narrative centring around Susanna. Unlike in the Greek chamber where Daniel is present, representing the crowd who delivers judgement, the absence of a crowd allows the viewer to become the judge, yet her innocence and piety is clear through her placement entirely inside the garden where she is separated from the elders, or rather the elders are kept out, by the trees and by her cry for help. Another such visual interpretation is found in Chamber XIII of the catacomb of Saints Petrus and Macellinus, except here the elders are shown with bare muscular legs, indicating their sexual threat and lust. Yet the isolated garden space Susanna is placed in,<sup>39</sup> the *orans* pose, and the relation to the *orant* in paradise

37 Smith, “Inventing Marital Chastity,” 11; Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 62–65; Kinney, “Petition, Prostration, and Tears.”

38 Smith, “Inventing Marital Chastity,” 12. Sered and Cooper discuss Deuteronomy 22:28–29, which describes rape and its penalty, to argue that Susanna does not fall within such categories and as a woman has not transgressed nor elicited male reprisal; see Susan Sered and Samuel Cooper, “Sexuality and Social Control: Anthropological Reflections on the Book of Susanna,” in *The Judgement of Susanna: Authority and Witness*, ed. E. Spolsky (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1996), 43–55.

39 Important to note is the secluded garden theme as a *topoi* for virtuous women. The Virgin Mary is often referred to as an “enclosed garden” and is often seen in Christian art as seated within an enclosed garden, particularly in reference to the annunciation and elsewhere in the visitation scenes. In early Christian writings, both Augustine and Ambrose speak of Mary and Susanna in the same terms.

*topoi* registers Susanna's piety, marital chastity, and faith. There is then no question that Susanna represented for the married lay congregant an exemplar for married life.

## Secondary Visual Interpretation: Susanna and the Lamb

Susanna as the *orans* in paradise was by no means the only type of interpretation available to early Christians. Susanna also adopted the *topoi* of the Christian philosopher, conflating the *orans* in paradise with the philosopher and placing Susanna between two trees and holding a scroll. Another visual interpretation of Susanna which is seldomly explored is the interesting representation of Susanna as a lamb with two wolves on either side, as found in the *arcosolium* of Celerina in the Catacomb of Praetextatus (Figure 5). In early Christian art, the lamb is a symbol of purity, innocence, and humility, as well as of meekness and docility.<sup>40</sup> The lamb is a fitting allegorical representation of Susanna and may illuminate a secondary level interpretation of the Susanna narrative.



**Figure 5:** Susanna among the Wolves (ca. 350 C.E.) Painted plaster, 9203 x 4296 mm. Arcosolium of Celerina, Catacomb of Praetextatus, Rome (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Rome, photo no. Pre, C, 20).

In analysing Susanna's character in the text, feminist commentators have noted her passive characterisation, commenting on how little the text truly says about her. Both the OG and Θ versions of the text express that she is a beautiful woman ("a very beautiful woman and feared the Lord," Θ v. 2; "elegant in appearance," OG v. 7) and "trained in the Law of Moses" (Θ v. 3). Her description is one of beauty and righteousness and is constructed in such a way that Susanna is the object being seen by the elders rather than a person in her own right.<sup>41</sup> From the narrative outset the reader

40 Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *A Guide to Christian Art* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 184.

41 The elements of "looking at," "seeing," "male gaze," and "voyeurism" are popular topics for the study of Susanna in both textual studies and art history. For seminal works exploring these topics see Robert Hahn, "Caught in the Act: Looking at Tintoretto's Susanna," *The Massachusetts Review* 45, no. 4 (2004): 633-647; Jennie Grillo, "Showing Seeing in Susanna: The Virtue of the Text,"

meets Susanna through her beauty, and once the elders are introduced it is framed by the elders' seeing of her whereafter she is an object of sight and seemingly the cause of their lust, placing blame on Susanna. Another striking characterisation is her silence throughout the text. Except for the two instances where she cries out in the garden (Θ v. 24) and again at her trial (Θ v. 42), she has no true speaking role—the only time she has dialogue is when she contemplates her options in the garden and even then the options which are available to her both have a negative outcome. Some feminist commentators therefore interpret Susanna as a character with no agency, only an object to be looked at in the narrative. Susan Sered and Samuel Cooper note that Susanna's femaleness is aligned with a range of traits associated with structural weakness signifying to the reader that Susanna has no access to socially recognised power.<sup>42</sup>

Yet when speaking of silence within a text, Rowan Williams argues that there exists no true silence:

We cannot imagine an “unframed” or pure silence: we can only imagine the silence in which *we* are not hearing anything .... silence for us is always the gap which occurs *here*, in this specific place between words. ... To talk *about* silence, I would argue, is always to talk about what specifically we are not hearing.<sup>43</sup>

Influenced by arguments such as Williams's, Jennie Grillo suggests that Susanna's silence is not silence at all, but rather a “speaking” silence which is deliberate refusal, withdrawal, or critique because her silence is framed between speech.<sup>44</sup> This is notable, as Julian Pitt-Rivers links silence with female shame in early Mediterranean society.<sup>45</sup> The Susanna narrative modulates a range of sensory experiences related to shame. The first instance of shame attaching to Susanna comes from her own household, namely through her servants (Θ v. 27), and secondly when she is exposed at her trial it is not said that Susanna weeps, but rather “all her friends and all that saw her” (Θ v. 33). Thirdly it is her parents, husband, and children who celebrate that she has no shame after she is vindicated by Daniel (Θ v. 63). Throughout these instances we find an interactive structure of shame where one person's shame is replicated in another in what Silvan Tomkins calls a “hall of mirrors of shame.”<sup>46</sup> We do not find that Susanna herself

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*Prooftexts* 35, nos. 2–3 (2015): 250–270, <https://doi.org/10.2979/prooftexts.35.2-3.05>; 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* 33, no. 2 (2017): 55–72, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.33.2.05>.

42 Sered and Cooper, “Sexuality and Social Control,” 44.

43 Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 157.

44 Jennie Grillo, “Seeing Silence: Susanna's Christological Quiet,” *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no. 4 (2017): 744.

45 Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 42.

46 Silvan Tomkins, “Shame-Humiliation and Contempt-Disgust,” in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedwick and Adam Frank (Duke University Press, 1995).

feels shame. The climax of Susanna's shame comes at her trial where her veil is stripped, she is touched (or rather assaulted), and seen by the elders who finally satiate their lust. Here once again Susanna is silent. Smith<sup>47</sup> argues that her silence, along with the "laying of the hands" (⊕ v. 34) signals sacrifice, and willing sacrifice at that.<sup>48</sup> Susanna's willingness to die in silence, that is to say, without defending herself and putting her faith in God, is commended by early Christian writers such as Ambrose:

She achieved more by keeping silent than she would have done if she had spoken. In keeping silent before men, she spoke to God, and she devised no greater proof of her chastity than this silence. Her conscience spoke when her voice was not heard.<sup>49</sup>

Important to note is that for Ambrose, Susanna's silence is a marker of Roman feminine modesty:<sup>50</sup>

She kept silent before men, but spoke to God, for a woman's defense of herself before the people was shameful, and while her modesty was being defended, her shamelessness was shown.<sup>51</sup>

Yet Ambrose goes beyond mere gender roles and compares her willing sacrifice and silence to that of Jesus;

The Lord is accused and stands mute. And he is fittingly mute, who does not lack a defence; let those who fear to be overcome solicit a defence. Thus, by remaining silent, he does not confirm the accusation, but by not refuting it, he disdains it... But why should I speak of God? Susanna remained silent, and conquered, for better is the cause which is not defended and proven.<sup>52</sup>

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47 Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity," 6.

48 The element of silence and sacrifice brings to the forefront discussions on Susanna as an ideal for female martyrdom. Brock and Harvey discuss the link between female martyrdom, good and evil, and women who have been sexually assaulted. See Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 22–25. See also Chris L. de Wet, "Pseudo-John Chrysostom's Homily On Susanna (CPG4567) (Daniel 13 LXX): Masculinity, Psychic Typology and the Construction of early Christian salvation History," *HTS Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021): 1–6.

49 Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* 1.3.9 (NPNF 2/10:2).

50 Grillo, "Seeing Silence: Susanna's Christological Quiet," 749.

51 Ambrose. *S. Ambrosii De Tobia: A Commentary*, trans. Lois Miles Zucker (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 93.

52 Ambrose, *Expositions of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson (California: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2003) 423.

Grillo<sup>53</sup> notes that Ambrose’s comparison of Susanna to Christ was commonplace exegesis,<sup>54</sup> and that she was an early female typology for Christ. Williams<sup>55</sup> characterises Jesus’s silence as an “achieved silence” and explains that “they are silences with a history behind them of free decision. . . . And their effect is thus also to challenge any specific bids to power over the body and language of any other person.” Susanna’s silence in light of interpreting Jesus’s silence is a sign of strength and defiance—she uses her free decision to remain silent at her trial, challenging the claims to power over her body and language around her. Susanna’s shame then, for Grillo,<sup>56</sup> is also not shame but rather shamelessness or an acceptance of shame. When the elders humiliate her and strip her veil, laying their hands on her and in essence sexually assaulting her, and condemning her to death, she does not look down or shy away, but rather the Theodotian text is explicit in visualising her cry to God for help, with visual language appropriately visualising her as an *orans*. This change signals an active rather than passive Susanna whose cry to God inspires Daniel’s intervention.<sup>57</sup> Her theological pronouncement addressing God in Θ v. 42 as “you who are familiar with secret things, you who know all things before their beginning” invites the scrutiny of God who is *holos ophthalmos* (“all seeing”) in Hippolytus’s<sup>58</sup> words, lifting her head to the heavens in contrast with the elders who, in Θ v. 9, “turned away their eyes so they might not look to the heavens.”

Through her cry to God Susanna acted in her capacity as a woman; unable to step outside her accepted societal role and be heard, she was rather defiant in her silence, willing to sacrifice her life. For Pseudo-Chrysostom this made Susanna a model of chastity, a suffering victim, and a courageous victor over her enemies.<sup>59</sup> In a sermon he vividly depicted Susanna as a lamb between two wolves and argued that her fight was “more glorious” than that of Joseph refusing Potiphar’s wife’s advances: “And when she sent her handmaidens away to fetch ointment, both elders ran at her like wolves at a lamb, (and) held (her) down, wanting to tear (her) apart by the insane passion of their licentiousness”<sup>60</sup>

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53 Grillo, “Seeing Silence: Susanna’s Christological Quiet,” 750.

54 Tkacz has written extensively on the topic of Susanna as a typology for Christ and has extended this argument to other women as well. See Catherine Brown Tkacz, “Susanna as a Type of Christ,” *Studies in Iconography* 20 (1999): 101–153; Catherine Brown Tkacz, “Women as Types of Christ: Susanna and Jephthah’s Daughter,” *Gregorianum* 85, no. 2 (2004): 278–311; Catherine Brown Tkacz, “Ἀνεβόησεν Φωνῆ Μεγάλη: Susanna and the Synoptic Passion Narratives,” *Gregorianum* 87, no. 3 (2006): 449–489.

55 Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 178.

56 Grillo, “Seeing Silence: Susanna’s Christological Quiet,” 745.

57 While this is a worthwhile interpretation, Tilford comments on Susanna’s reliance on a male to save her and critiques the fact that no part of her own household defends her. See Tilford, “The Greek Book of Daniel,” 676–677.

58 Hippolytus, *Comm. Dan.* 6.61 (ANF 1/5:193).

59 Drake, *Slandering the Jew*, 75.

60 Katherin Papadopoulos, “Ps. Chrysostom De Susanna Sermo (PG 56: 589-594 = CPG 4567): Draft Translation,” Academia, n.d. [https://www.academia.edu/33427701/Ps\\_Chrysostom\\_De](https://www.academia.edu/33427701/Ps_Chrysostom_De)

Whilst the ambiguous nature of Susanna prompts the recognition of feminist critiques of the text which should rightfully be raised, arguments from scholars such as Grillo and Tkacz lay a convincing basis for interpretations which shed light on Susanna as a heroine figure, defiant in her silence and who rejects shame, and the first woman to be interpreted as a type for Christ.<sup>61</sup> I do not suggest that this negates the violence and trauma that she experienced but rather brings into consideration the multilayered responses of victims. Such an interpretation goes beyond focusing on Susanna's victimhood, but speaks to her experience as a survivor. From such interpretations courage and defiance comes to the foreground, defiance of both the shame she is supposed to experience but also defiance against authority and the majority culture.

### Reparative Visual Interpretation: Susanna and the South African Context

Susanna and the Elders is difficult to approach from a contemporary feminist hermeneutical perspective. The narrative can be viewed as part of what Phyllis Trible<sup>62</sup> in her seminal work has coined "texts of terror" while Cheryl Exum<sup>63</sup> draws the narrative into a cluster of biblical narratives she calls "rape by the pen." There are feminist biblical scholars, such as Sharon Moughtin-Mumby,<sup>64</sup> who choose to exclude texts which feature violence towards women as there is seemingly no redemptive language and contemporary readers cannot make sense of the violence perpetrated. While the Susanna narrative is not overtly violent as is the case with texts such as 2 Samuel 13:1–22, Judges 19:1–30, and Ezekiel 23, the violence is implicit, and Susanna's silence heightens the injustice. Even when considering Williams's and Grillo's argument that silence is not always silence but may be a defiant silence, such interpretations do not and cannot translate to communities and individuals who experience violence. Rather, the Susanna narrative reinforces silence in victims, especially when considering early Christian praise of Susanna as an exemplar for women. As Philip Nolte argues, cultural and time differences make it impossible for Susanna to liberate South African women.<sup>65</sup> Rather, through a reparative visual criticism it is possible to reestablish a relationship with the narrative and restore the memory of the woman in the narrative based on a reading of the text which critiques traditional patriarchal interpretations.

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\_Susanna\_Sermo\_PG\_56\_589\_594\_CPG\_4567\_Draft Translation. For more on Pseudo-Chrysostom and Susanna, especially the interesting masculine elements of the text, see de Wet, "Pseudo-John Chrysostom's Homily on Susanna (CPG 4567) (Daniel 13 LXX)."

61 Catherine Brown Tkacz, "Women as Types of Christ," 284.

62 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984).

63 J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 196–197.

64 Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, "Ezekiel 16 and 23," in *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 204.

65 S. Philip Nolte, "A Politics of the Female Body: Reading Susanna (LXX Additions to Daniel) in a Brutalized South African Society," *Biblische Notizen* 168 (2016): 16.

Carrol Clarkson argues that the “process of reconciliation begins with the projection of a past worth remembering.”<sup>66</sup> In revisiting and reanalysing ancient texts and iconography and placing them in conversation with contemporary works of art, biblical women, such as Susanna, become visible through the retelling of their stories and reimagining their testimonies, recognising that their stories are the lived reality for many women. In this way, Eliza Garnsey argues that “artworks can fill out affective topologies in ways that facilitate or stimulate recognition and feelings of experience... The recognition is essential in order to comprehend and respond to diverse claims of individuals and groups affected.”<sup>67</sup> In the South African context, both theology and the visual arts have separately contributed to the effort of reconciliation, justice, and remembrance in a post-apartheid society. Yet the topic of reconciliation, biblical studies, and the visual arts have received almost no attention within the South African context—it is only through the work of J. W. de Gruchy, who approaches the topic as a theologian, that the visual arts have found an invitation to a new arena in religious studies where discussions on reconciliation may take place.

While it is noted that the discussions within theology and the visual arts, and the role an interdisciplinary approach may play in discussions on justice, remembering, and reconciliation is much larger than the current article allows for, it is the aim of reparative visual criticism to bring such questions and discussions to the forefront and offer a reading of the text, through the help of the visual arts, aimed at repairing not only harmful exegesis of the text, but also the readers’ relationship with the text and future interpretations. In relation to the theme of the article which explores violence towards women in the biblical text and interpretations which may harm rather than heal, the aim of the article and the method applied is to recognise the character of Susanna and to remember the violence faced while reflecting on the place of the text in contemporary society. Including visual interpretations of the Susanna narrative allows for a new space to engage with the history of interpretation of the text and include other women like

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66 Carrol Clarkson, “Drawing the Line: Justice and the Art of Reconciliation,” in *Justice and Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, ed. Antje du Bois-Pedain and Francois du Bois (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 278.

67 Eliza Garnsey, *The Justice of Visual Art: Creative State Building in Times of Political Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 12.

Susanna, such as Phila Ndwandwe who is remembered through the work of Judith Mason.



**Figure 6:** Judith Mason, *The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent I* (1998). Oil on board, 1660 x 1220 mm. Constitutional Court Art Collection, Johannesburg (CCAC# 0161a)



**Figure 7:** Judith Mason, *The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent II* (1998). Oil on canvas, 1900 x 1600 mm. Constitutional Court Art Collection, Johannesburg (CCAC# 0161b)



**Figure 8:** Judith Mason, *The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent III (The Blue Dress)* (1998). Found plastic bags, thread, white paint, approx. 2000 x 700 x 450 mm. Constitutional Court Art Collection, Johannesburg (CCAC# 0161c)

Judith Mason's *The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent* (Figures 6–8), more commonly known as “The Blue Dress,” is a combination of an installation work and two artworks housed inside the Constitutional Court of South Africa.<sup>68</sup> Mason created these pieces in homage to Phila Ndwandwe who was a member of Umkhonto weSizwe during apartheid and disappeared in 1988. It was not until the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) inquiries that Ndwandwe's body was finally found and evidence revealed that seven security branch officers were responsible for her abduction, detention, and murder when she refused to reveal any information.<sup>69</sup> Their testimonies led to the discovery of her naked body with a blue plastic bag wrapped around her, most often cited as appearing as a pair of underwear. As the title suggests, Ndwandwe is the woman who kept silent, and was silenced.

Mason represents Ndwandwe's struggle through a blue dress sown out of blue plastic bags with a handwritten message from Mason at the bottom. This blue dress appears

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68 The works are housed in the Constitutional Court to illustrate the potential that art has to add depth and complexity to politics. See Rosemarie Buikema, “Monumental Dresses: Coming to Terms with Racial Repression,” in *Teaching “Race” with a Gendered Edge*, ed. Brigitte Hipfl and Kristín Loftsdóttir (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012) and Eliza Garnsey “South Africa's Blue Dress: Art as an Alternative Record of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence,” Blog, *16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign*, December 2, 2020, <https://16daysblogathon.blog/2020/12/02/day-ten-south-africas-blue-dress-art-as-an-alternative-record-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>.

69 Garnsey, “South Africa's Blue Dress.”

again as oil on canvas where it is flanked by a hyena on the left, tearing a blue plastic bag. The message Mason wrote on the dress reads:

Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armour of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood, and against powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in sordid places. Your weapons were your silence and a piece of rubbish. Finding that bag and wearing it until you were disinterred is such a frugal, commonsensical, house-wifely thing to do, an ordinary act ... At some level you shamed your captors, and they did not compound their abuse of you by stripping you a second time. Yet they killed you. We only know your story because a sniggering man remembered how brave you were. Memorials to your courage are everywhere; they blow about in the streets and drift on the tide and cling to thorn-bushes. This dress is made from some of them. *Hambe kahle. Umkhonto* ("Go well, Spear of the Nation").

It is not difficult to view both Susanna and Ndwandwe in the same light, both lambs led to the slaughter. Whereas Susanna faced wolves, Ndwandwe faces a hyena. Mason uses the plastic bag to signify Ndwandwe's resistance to violation and as a marker of defiance. Her silence in the face of violence, sexual abuse, and ultimately death echoes the experience of Susanna. Like interpretations of Susanna, the TRC report emphasises Ndwandwe's dignity, modesty, and nakedness, yet fail to address or acknowledge the implicit sexual violence. Ndwandwe's plastic bag here echoes Susanna's veil, worn to shame their oppressors and hide their nakedness. Yet this did not stop violence being committed against them. Mason highlights this through the imagery of the hyena tearing the dress through the dirt.<sup>70</sup> However, both women faced their oppressors with courage, dignity, and silent defiance, refusing to accept shame.

These works are mutually illuminating and makes it possible to acknowledge that women have historically experienced violence and are threatened with and experience sexual violation of their bodies, shamed by their nakedness. In both cases, issues of justice are at play. While Susanna was saved by divine intervention, Ndwandwe's story is reflective of the South African context. Mason's work, housed in the Constitutional Court, is a comment on the TRC's failure to address sexual and gender-based violence and the continued failure by government and law enforcement to do so today.

## Conclusion

The ambiguous nature of Susanna makes it difficult to approach the narrative from a singular viewpoint. It is clear through early Christian art and interpretations that at a primary level Susanna was understood as a model for how women should behave, particularly married women in reference to anxiety about sexuality and the place of married households in paradise. Yet interpreters often speak about the dangers of Susanna's passivity and docility with regard to modern readings and the message it poses to women readers—that they must keep silent and are somehow complicit in their

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70 Garnsey, "South Africa's Blue Dress."

own abuse. Yet in viewing Susanna as a lamb in early Christian art, a second level interpretation comes to the foreground, one which illuminates a reading of the text which centres on Susanna's silence and shame as an act of agency and resistance. Through such a reading and from evidence from early Christian writers, Susanna appears as one of the first women to be held in high regard by early male Christian writers, praised for her courage and dignity. Grillo convincingly argues that Susanna uses her silence in the text as defiance of both authority and shame, and that she speaks when appropriate within her context. Yet while such a reading is worthwhile in the early Christian context, it is difficult to translate to contemporary issues of sexual and gender-based violence. Rather, I argue that from a contemporary South African viewpoint, Susanna as the lamb when viewed alongside Mason's work and the history of Phila Ndwandwe, speaks to the experiences of women in South Africa, both past and present. Together these works are *in memoriam* of women who are survivors and victims of crimes against them and serve as a reminder that women in South Africa are not awarded protection or justice for the crimes committed against them.

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