Hebrew Bible Figures In Artwork

The contents and characters of the Hebrew Bible have inspired people for generations to create countless well-known pieces of art in a variety of different mediums. The societal impact of these art pieces are so vast that they have shaped the minds of the viewers and have defined the cultural landscape of great cities throughout the world. Some of the most influential artworks of characters in the Hebrew Bible include David by Michelangelo and Bathsheba at Her Bath by Rembrandt. These works of art may seem to simply depict these biblical characters, but are packed with immense symbolism and meaning that may give us a different understanding of the personas we are so familiar with.

In Florence, Italy, during the height of the Renaissance period, Michelangelo was creating a masterpiece. Commissioned to complete a piece to decorate the roof of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, Michelangelo decided to sculpt a likeness of King David out of white marble. Completing the piece between 1501 and 1504, the statue was decided to decorate the Palazzo della Signoria instead, due to its massive size and immense weight.

The subject of Michelangelo's masterpiece is David, one of the most notable characters in the Hebrew Bible. David is remembered for being the second king of Israel, despite his humble beginnings. God made David king because he saw something special in him and David proved worthy. Although David was king, he still made many mistakes, which makes him an extremely relatable character in the Hebrew Bible. The most famous story of David is his battle with the giant Goliath, where David defeated his gigantic sword-bearing opponent with only a rock and sling. This statue depicts David before his legendary battle that he exited as victor. Although some other works of David depict him after his battle with Goliath, such as David with the Head of Goliath, Michelangelo pursued a different route in this piece. David is instead portrayed right before the battle and somehow embodies confidence as well as doubtfulness.

David is shown in the Hebrew Bible as a confident young man, as depicted in 1 Samuel 17:37, "The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of the Philistine." As seen here, David's immense faith in God makes him extremely confident in his own personal fate. This self-assurance is depicted in David through his casually posed physique. Michelangelo, however adds another dimension to his work that contrasts the representation of David in the Hebrew Bible: David's face is shown to be worrisome and doubtful. David is portrayed in this piece as a confident man, through his body, which may foreshadow his victory, as well as uncertain, through his face, most likely due to his upcoming battle with Goliath. The uncertainty portrayed in the statue illustrates a different side of David that is not so much seen in the Hebrew Bible. Due to the strong dual symbolism of this statue, it becomes such an incredible representation of the duality of man and the complexities of human nature. Furthermore, Michelangelo's deep consideration for his depiction of David is seen through the way he referenced biblical text to create his statue. On the right hand of the statue David, is a prominent vein which is meant to depict David's strength. This particular detail is attributed to Psalm 16:8 when David says, "I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." Not only does the vein represent David's physical strength and idealization, but it also symbolizes David's strength in God and in his faith. This work is simply not just an objective portrayal of David, but an interpretive piece that allows us to

take a deeper look into the many layers of David.

A little more than a century later, in the Netherlands, Rembrandt was painting Bathsheba at Her Bath. Finished in 1654, the oil painting depicts the biblical character Bathsheba. Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, until King David intervened. Upon seeing the young woman Bathsheba bathing, David asked her to come to his palace to be with him. After finding out that Bathsheba was pregnant from David, the king devised a plan to put Uriah on the front lines of battle in order to get him killed. This painting depicts the consequential moment that King David sees Bathsheba bathing and decides to invite her to join him. In the painting, the letter in Bathsheba's hand is meant to be from David and represents his call for the young woman.

The painting of Bathsheba during her bath gives much insight into the character of Bathsheba and the contrasting depictions of her in the Hebrew Bible and artistic representations. In the Hebrew Bible, Bathsheba is portrayed as the victim of King David's authority, however, in many artistic portrayals of the woman, Bathsheba is moreso depicted as the morally questionable seductress who tempts David. The reason why there is such a stark contrast in the portrayal of this biblical character is because in artistic representations of Bathsheba, she is illustrated as a naked woman bathing outside, whereas in the Hebrew Bible she is simply portrayed as a woman who happens to catch the eye of King David. 2 Samuel 11:2 shows the moment when David first lays eyes on Bathsheba: "One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her." Nowhere in the text does it state that Bathsheba aimed to seduce or tempt King David, instead it displays the fact that David was the one who sought her out and initiated the affair. The woman's nakedness depicted in Bathsheba at Her Bath has caused many to blame Bathsheba for causing the affair with King David and has lead many people to see her as an immoral and sinful woman. When the story of David and Bathsheba is meant to be a story of King David's downfalls and mistakes, the blaming of Bathsheba for all that occurred is a tragic example of how women throughout history are solely blamed for the misfortunes that befall them. The condemnation of Bathsheba is seen here in a Dutch booklet: "This sin [of David and Bathsheba] was caused by the pride and vanity of Bathsheba which she exhibited when bathing. Therefore any good woman should bathe and wash herself in secrecy and never, to please the world, show her head, neck nor breast uncovered." This excerpt shows how artworks such as Bathsheba at Her Bath could be used to blame Bathsheba for what occurred, by using the simple act of bathing naked as a way to rebuke her. David was the King of Israel, whose power in the ancient world had little restriction, therefore certainly Bathsheba would join him at his palace, however, Bathsheba is often used as an example for "women who used their seductive tricks to bring about the downfall of powerful men." David even knew before calling for Bathsheba that she was married to Uriah and nevertheless invited her over anyways. This shift in narrative that only focuses on the faults of women to excuse the actions of men depicts an issue that is still as relevant today as it was in biblical times.

These two immensely influential pieces of work, David and Bathsheba at Her Bath, give us insight into the society in which they were created as well as society today. By analyzing the way the characters David and Bathsheba are depicted in these pieces, we can better understand the motivation and intention behind each artistic decision. Although well known biblical figures, by understanding the symbolism that is present within these artworks, we begin to delve deeper and uncover the hidden layers that exist within these characters, as we understand their place in the modern world.

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