PURITY AND IMPURITY
THE NAKED WOMAN BATHING IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN ART

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The image of the nude woman in water in medieval Jewish and Christian art is related to contemporary perceptions of immersion. Belief in the purifying and healing effects of water, going back to the biblical period, was adopted by Jews and Christians alike in creating certain basic rituals. For Jews immersion was the final stage of the purification process demanded of women completing their menstrual period. For Christians, it was associated with the sacrament of baptism, signifying admission to the Christian faith. Both of these notions figured in the development of the medieval image of the naked woman bathing. Together with the sanctified aspect, the connection between feminine nudity and water, especially in visual representations, contains elements of temptation. This aspect is especially dominant in the design of the image on secular luxury objects, but it is also recognizable in biblical iconography, as in the narrative of Bathsheba and David. This chapter considers facets of that image. It discusses the similarities and differences between representations in the Jewish and Christian contexts and, through its various expressions, considers the similarities and dissimilarities between the Jewish and Christian attitudes toward menstruation, purification, and sexual relations within marriage.

Menstruation, Purification, and Baptism

The medieval Ashkenazi sages laid special importance on the purification process imposed on women after the days of menstruation. According to Jewish law, to complete her menstrual period (five days at least), a woman must count seven “clean days.” During the whole time (at least twelve days altogether) she is called niddah (literally, excommunicated),

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a state indicating her impurity. At the termination of the niddah period she is ready for the final act of purification, the ritual immersion in water. Fixed rules defined the suitable sources of water for immersion: a spring or rain and groundwater gathered directly. Immersion in a regular domestic bath was not permitted, since it involved water collected through human artifice. Special bathhouses—miqva’ot (singular miqveh)—were usually constructed. A deep shaft was dug to reach the groundwater, which was collected in a pool built in a way that allowed the water to be replaced regularly. A staircase enabled women to descend into the bathing chamber. Such bathhouses, usually situated not far from a synagogue, were excavated in several German towns, including Speyer (1128), Worms (1186), and Bamberg (fifteenth century). Some of them, like the miqveh in Speyer, which is close in architectural design to the contemporary renovations carried out in the local Cathedral, were decorated in a way that stressed their exalted religious status.

A woman bathing in a miqveh is depicted in the Ashkenazi Hamburg Miscellany, a collection of ritual texts with a calendar attached that was produced around 1434 in the middle Rhine region (Fig. 1). In the lower part of the illustration, a naked woman is bending down in the water. Above, lying in bed, is her waiting husband. Unclothed and partly covered by a blanket, he is holding a lighted candle. The illustration appears along the margin of the piyyut (liturgical poem), “I will give thanks to you for though you were angry with me, your anger is turned away” (אודר ב אנדפ ב וחשב), written in Provence by the eleventh-century poet Joseph ben Solomon of Carcassonne. In succeeding centuries this piyyut became an integral part of the Ashkenazi rite, as is attested by its perpetual inclusion in Ashkenazi prayer books copied between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century.

Recited on the Sabbath of Hanukkah, the feast celebrating the Maccabees’ victory over the Hellenistic rulers, the piyyut tells of the serious troubles brought upon the people of Israel by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Most of the tyrannical decrees recounted in the poem refer to ancient