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A Rabbi with Wings: Remarks on Rembrandt's Etching "Abraham Entertaining the Angels"

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To the memory of Hans van de Waal, magnanimous friend, exemplary humanist and scholar, whose mind and heart were refined by suffering and persecution: *Peregrinando Quaerimus.*

REMBRANDT'S INTERPRETATIONS of the Bible are often so original and profound, and at the same time so faithful to the text of the scriptures, that his indulgence in a little respectful fun appears to be a rare exception.

In the literature on Rembrandt, his etching commonly called "Abraham Entertaining the Angels," signed and dated 1656, is usually discussed because of its relation to a Mohammedan Indian miniature, now in the Louvre, showing four Orientals seated under a tree. Rembrandt copied it in a drawing that is now in the British Museum (Figure 1).[1] The four bearded dignitaries, all with heavy turbans, sit in a half circle on a carpet. Two hold cups, one fingers beads, and one rests his arms on his knees. In front, there is a tray with more cups, in the left corner a pitcher. A mountain landscape forms the background.

Rembrandt adapted this composition to his interpretation of the visit of three men to Abraham as related in Genesis (Figure 2), borrowing many features from the model: the composition is symmetrical; there are the carpet and the tray with refreshments; there is also the pitcher, and at least three of the figures are squatting. The adaptation to the Biblical story necessitated, of course, many changes. The tree as a dominant vertical has been replaced by a massive pillar, serving as doorpost and house corner at the same time. The entertainment takes place on the steps outside Abraham's house, not before his tent as stated in the Bible. The Moslem on the right has been turned into a standing, humble figure—Abraham holding a pitcher. Rembrandt has made it a point to show his age; he appears bent and shriveled, leaning forward while he listens in

1. Arthur M. Hind, *Rembrandt* (Cambridge, Mass., 1932) p. 59, points to an entry in Rembrandt's inventory "een dito (boeck) vol curieuse miniatuur teeckeningen," that might indicate a book with Indian miniatures. A. Bredius, however, in *Oud-Holland* 29 (1911) p. 139, disagrees on the ground that Indian miniatures were usually in Dutch documents of Rembrandt's time called "Suratsche (or Mogolsche) teekeningen." The oriental model seems to have stimulated more comments than the print itself; A. Hind, *Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings* (London, 1923) p. 115. Werner Weisbach, *Rembrandt* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1926) p. 448, mentions the Indian miniature used as a model, and states that "it was in any case the unusual character of the exotic, so much beloved by Rembrandt, that stimulated him to make a copy." But for all the interest in the exotic, the importance of this little print lies elsewhere: in the masterly psychological condensation of the drama in Abraham's family life into the innocent appearance of a picnic. Ludwig Münz, *Rembrandt's Etchings* II (London, 1952) p. 90, after emphasizing the Indian miniature as one important source of Rembrandt's etching, calls Lucas van Leyden's engraving "Abraham and the Angels" the most important other source. This is difficult to accept, for Lucas restricts his interpretation of the Biblical text to the dramatic contrast between the three tall and winged standing figures and the patriarch prostrate before them. Also, the description in Musée du Louvre, *Les Plus Belles Eaux-Fortes de Rembrandt, Exposition 1969–1970*, p. 44, no. 84, quotes the traditional general reference to "l'oeuvre gravé de Lucas," but does not explain further.

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respectful silence. Abraham, addressed by the Lord, occupies the right front angle of the design; Sarah appears in the left upper corner, "behind" the Lord (Gen. 18:10).[2] The forefinger of her right hand, touching the door, reveals that she must have opened it herself (Figure 3). Her face is clearly visible; the delicate conversation between herself and God, who has his back to her, announcing a child to be born in her ninetieth year, offered the illustrator several alternatives (Gen. 18:9–15). Rembrandt might have shown her first astonishment, or her skeptical laugh,[3] or her fear when reproached by the Lord for doubting his word. To depict her laughing would have turned the scene into a farce. Rembrandt instead showed a complex expression—curiosity mixed with awe; her lips are slightly parted and her eyebrows raised.

FIGURE 1

Rembrandt, drawing after an oriental picture (now in the Louvre), British Museum (photo: copyright British Museum)

Sarah's laugh, her first reaction to God's annunciation, is understandable. Abraham had reacted in the same way when he received this announcement on the occasion of the making of the Covenant: "Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?" (Gen. 17:17).[4]

The third person, who at first glimpse might be taken as staffage or as a device for establishing a triangular apex to the group of four men in the foreground, also belongs to Abraham's family and is therefore essential to the present scene. The sturdy boy practicing with his bow,[5] his case of arrows at his left hip, totally unconcerned with the visitors, is evidently Ishmael,[6] the son of Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar, conceived by Abraham when Sarah, unable to bear, had given Hagar to Abraham. The ensuing marital difficulties, the jealousy between the women, Hagar's mistreatment and later expulsion are vividly recounted in Genesis 16 and 21. According to Genesis 21:20, Ishmael "dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer." The hunting bow identifies him here and reminds us of Hagar's tragedy after God's announcement to Sarah came true. Rembrandt was profoundly concerned with the cruel dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael, and their expulsion

2. Rembrandt may have been familiar with an earlier representation of the spying Sarah, the engraving by Georg Pencz (Bartsch VIII, 6; Le Blanc III, 6) showing Abraham and Hagar embracing on a bed while Sarah looks in from behind a window curtain with unmistakably mixed feelings.

3. Sarah, after her skeptical laugh (Genesis 18:12), laughs once more after the birth of Isaac, this time in joy and triumph: "God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6).

4. Abraham's skepticism expressed in laughter (Gen. 17:17) was not warranted. Not only did Sarah bear Isaac at the time foretold, but long after her death Abraham took still another wife, Keturah, and begot with her six sons (Gen. 25:1–2), whom he sent away from Isaac (Gen. 25:6) as he had done with Ishmael. He lived to a hundred threescore and fifteen years (Gen. 25:7).

5. Not "drawing water out of a well," as stated in the *Descriptive Catalogue of the Prints of Rembrandt by an Amateur* (London, 1836).

6. The importance of Ishmael has admirably been discussed by L. Münz in "Rembrandts Altersstil und die Barockklassik," *Jahr-Buch der Kunsthistor. Sammlungen in Wien*, N.F. 9, p. 219.

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FIGURE 2
Rembrandt, Abraham Entertaining the Angels, etching signed and dated 1656 (Hind, 286; Bartsch, 29). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Henry Walters, 22.51.8

FIGURE 3
Sarah, detail of Figure 2

into the wilderness. It is remarkable and especially significant for the interpretation of our main topic, the angels visiting Abraham, what varieties of emotional moments and phases are encompassed in Rembrandt's representations of the Hagar story. Apart from the scenes with Hagar despairing in the desert or encouraged by the angel, we find Abraham in extremely different attitudes: mildly and benignly talking with the weeping Hagar (Benesch Catalogue 499—Sarah absent), or banishing her with merciless gestures (etching of 1637, Hind Catalogue 149, Benesch 524); or again, putting his blessing hand on the head of Ishmael (Benesch 499, 916, 1008). Sometimes his figure is tenderly united with the figures of the banished ones (Benesch 916) while Sarah watches from afar, half hidden; sometimes, again, he stands isolated between the weeping Hagar and Ishmael with a gesture of helplessness and a worried and almost frightened face, while the hard-faced Sarah watches from the nearby window (Benesch 962). In the earliest of these representations, the etching of 1637 (Hind 149), Sarah, in the background, enjoys the tragic scene with a satisfied grin, and even little Isaac is visible in the shady hollow of the door. In the banishment scene Ishmael always appears as a sturdy youngster, well armed with a bow or lance, the image of the famous hunter he will become.

Turning now to the visitors, we find an unusual angel, actually only half an angel, at the extreme left. Rembrandt barely managed to squeeze in one of the wings to cover the right shoulder, instead of attaching it behind the shoulder in a traditional manner. The

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FIGURE 4
Menasseh ben Israel, detail of Figure 2

FIGURE 5
Rembrandt, portrait of Menasseh ben Israel, 1636 (Hind, 146; Bartsch, 269). Pierpont Morgan Library

angel is dark-haired, with a sharp, individual profile, probably after a Sephardic model, and looks down benignly, perhaps amusedly at old Abraham. Although I have no model to suggest for this angel, it seems probable that it is a portrait.[7]

The scene is dominated by the imposing bulk and eloquent gesture of the turbaned visitor holding the cup. His shining white beard creates a striking luminescence in front of the dark cave of the door. He is the only visitor without wings. Again Rembrandt's literal and at the same time imaginative interpretation of the text is admirable. Genesis 18:2 calls the visitors "three men," but Abraham has no doubts and immediately addresses him as "my Lord" (Gen. 18:3). He had been found worthy before to see the face of the Lord at the time of the Covenant, and then the Lord had formally presented himself: "the Lord appeared to Abraham, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God" (Gen. 17:1).

The most intriguing figure by far is the central angel between the Lord and Abraham—a small dainty body with lowered eyes and an uneasy and almost embarrassed expression (Figure 4). His wings are strange; they are entirely asymmetrical, his right one thin and strangely curved, almost in the shape of a harp, his left one more birdlike—solid and better feathered. One cannot help recalling Jacob Burkhardt's ironical remarks about Rembrandt's deficient mastery of anatomy, especially of that of his angels. The angel seems interested in the platter with food, holding a knife ready

7. James Draper, a colleague at the Metropolitan Museum, pointed out to me a similarity with Rembrandt's painting *St. James*, 1661, private collection, *Rembrandt after 300 Years* (Art Institute of Chicago, 1969) pp. 40, 41, 104.

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FIGURE 6
Govert Flinck, portrait of Menasseh ben Israel, 1637. Mauritshuis

FIGURE 7
Salomon Italia, portrait of Menasseh ben Israel, 1642. The motto on top: *Peregrinando Quaerimus.* To the left of the motto is the Wandering Jew, with staff and satchel, traditional symbols of the pilgrim

in his right hand, but is prevented from acting by the eloquent left hand of the Lord. Awkward and even funny also is the little satchel hanging on his chest, but the strangest characteristics are his beard and bald head, features not commonly associated with angels. The only solution to the mystery is to think of a portrait. The features are highly individualized—the broad forehead, the eyes set wide apart, the button nose, the full lips. But whose portrait, and who among Rembrandt's friends and acquaintances would merit participating in this Old Testament scene in the shape of an angel? The identical features appear in the face of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, whom Rembrandt portrayed exactly twenty years earlier (Figure 5); only then, as was natural, his hair was more abundant. The wide-set eyes are open, with a quiet, thoughtful, melancholy expression.[8] The same features are evident in the official portrait of Menasseh by Govert Flinck, dated 1637, in the Mauritshuis (Figure 6), and in the somewhat wooden likeness by the Jewish engraver Salomon Italia, dated 1642 (Figure 7).

Why would Rembrandt have been tempted to honor a friend by elevating him to the rank of angel? Menasseh ben Israel was a Dutch philosopher, historian, and theologian, born at La Rochelle about 1604, two years before Rembrandt. He was the son of Portuguese Jews who had fled Lisbon after the auto da fé of 1603 and settled in La Rochelle and then in Amsterdam. There

8. I am unable to agree with Christopher White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher: A Study of the Artist at Work* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1969) pp. 93, 94, who states that "the oriental look of the two angels . . . is undoubtedly suggested by a Moghul miniature."

Menasseh was educated and became, at the age of only sixteen, rabbi of the congregation Neveh Shalom. In 1638 this congregation was consolidated with the two other Sephardic congregations, Beth Ya'akob and Beth Yisrael. Menasseh, who stayed in office until 1655, was one of the most famous orators in the Amsterdam Synagogue. Of his numerous publications printed in Hebrew, Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, and English, we may mention here *El Conciliador*, 1632, a description and attempted reconciliation of seeming inconsistencies in the Old Testament; his *Esperanca de Israel*, 1650; and his *Piedra Gloriosa o de la Estatua de Nebuchadnesar*, about 1657, a year after Rembrandt's etching "Abraham Entertaining the Angels."

The *Esperanca* played an important role in Menasseh's life, and far beyond it in contemporary Jewish history, for this book was devoted to Messianic ideas, which were interlocked with the Jewish Diaspora. The reign of the Messiah and the restoration of the Holy Land could happen only after the dispersion of the Jews had caused them to reach every inhabited corner of the world, and Menasseh subscribed to the theory that even America had been included in the Diaspora since the American Indians could be identified with the "ten lost Tribes of Israel." On these grounds, he wrote a preface to his *Esperanca*, addressing the Parliament of England with the aim of obtaining readmission of the Jews to England. Menasseh's success, his visit to Cromwell, and the permission for the resettlement of the Jews in England, after Menasseh's death, are beyond the scope of this article. The *Piedra Gloriosa* has been mentioned here not only for its Messianic content, but also because of the four illustrations that Rembrandt contributed to it showing Daniel's vision of animals with God the Father and the Messiah above and other related subjects.[9] Rembrandt made these etchings in 1655, just a year before our print with its inclusion of Menasseh among the angels.

Apart from these facts, which alone attest to the close relation between Rembrandt and Menasseh,[10] it may also be remembered that they were neighbors, having houses almost opposite in the same street, the elegant Breestraat, only later called Yodenbreestraat, which was the center of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish merchants, and was far from being a narrow ghetto. They must have shared another intense interest—printing. As early as 1627, even before Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam, Menasseh had established a printing press in his own house, a business that rapidly expanded and helped Amsterdam to supersede Venice as the center of Hebrew printing on an international scale.[11]

One may say that this insertion of a seventeenth-century theologian into the world of the Patriarchs and his elevation to a winged travel companion of the Lord has a humorous touch. The scene itself as recounted in the Scriptures is tragicomic, and has humorous aspects, at least to late-born readers who are far removed from the stage in human life when the sacred and the secular were not yet strictly separated realms but intimately interwoven in daily experience Among the tragic elements is the barrenness of Abraham's favorite wife, Sarah, for ninety years; furthermore, the difficulty with Hagar, who had a son by Abraham before Sarah, and her fate of being expelled by Abraham, as illustrated by Rembrandt in many dramatic pictures, are deeply tragic. So, too, is the Sarah episode in Genesis 20, with the dream of Abimelech, king of Gerar, who had taken Sarah believing that she was Abraham's sister, not his wife, and was prevented from touching her by a dream sent to him by the Lord. On the other hand, there are features that can strike one as humorous: God the Almighty bringing in person the joyful announcement to Sarah, the restoration of fertility to a married couple in their nineties, and God's irritation at the skepticism of the old woman, reproaching her even though she had laughed "only in her heart." No wonder that Rembrandt, with his keen eye for human dignity and weakness alike, felt tempted to add to the fun a little, tender joke of his own.

9. Hans van de Waal, "Rembrandts Radierungen zur *Piedra gloriosa* des Menasseh ben Israel," *Imprimatur, Ein Jahrbuch für Bücherfreunde* 12 (1954–55) p. 52–60.

10. On Menasseh as a possible adviser to Rembrandt on disputed religious problems of their time, see my article "Rembrandt's 'Christ Presented to the People'—1655. A Meditation on Justice and Collective Guilt," *Oud-Holland* 84 (1969) pp. 188, 189.

11. On the familiarity of Rembrandt with religious movements in Amsterdam, and especially his relation to Menasseh ben Israel, see Hans Martin Rotermund, "Rembrandt und die religiösen Laienbewegungen in den Niederlanden seiner Zeit," *Nederlandsch Kunsthistorisk Jaarboek* 4 (1952/3).

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