

Rembrandt Reads Genesis

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While other great artists produced in the “historical” genre, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) had few equals as an interpreter of the biblical text, and no other old master has engendered as vast a sea of scholarship on their biblically-based art.¹ Several factors help to explain his unique orientation toward Jews, Hebrew, and the Bible. They merit a brief survey.

Rembrandt’s Dutch Republic was religiously tolerant and diverse for its age.² The Amsterdam Jewish community itself was increasingly made up of Ashkenazim, although the most famous Dutch Jew, Spinoza (1632–1677), had Sephardic roots. Historian Salo Baron dubbed seventeenth-century Amsterdam “Dutch Jerusalem.” Subsequent scholars have glamorized less fulsomely than Baron, but his verdict has remained intact.³ Rembrandt lived in a part of town with many Jewish residents and used Jewish models.⁴ He etched four biblical scenes for the renowned Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa* (*The Glorious Stone*). Rembrandt had Jewish clients; he quarreled with them as he did with his Christian customers. Rembrandt saw that Amsterdam’s Jews looked like and dressed like Amsterdam’s non-Jews; he superimposed no Old Testament lens when viewing contemporary Jews and eschewed antisemitic stereotypes.⁵ (The scholarly downside: many of Rembrandt’s allegedly “Jewish” paintings may not have been. *The Jewish Bride* did not depict Isaac and Rebekah, as many websites claim; it may not even depict a Jewish couple.⁶)

Dutch philosemites⁷ devoted great attention to the Hebrew Scriptures from a distinctly Protestant perspective.⁸ Jewish and Christian messianisms abounded: the Sabbatian movement found Amsterdam’s Jews susceptible to the idea that their return to the Holy Land was imminent; Rabbi Menasseh’s *Piedra Gloriosa* was a messianic tract. Visions of an eschatological future might seem like an unlikely area of Jewish-Christian collaboration, but apparently it was one. Other Dutch intellectuals were committed Hebraists: the polymath Hugo Grotius argued for the Jews’ residential rights in part because they could prove useful in Hebrew language instruction. As to Rembrandt, Steven Nadler wrote: “No one equaled his ability to make Hebrew – real Hebrew – an integral element of his work, central to its message and not merely a decorative or trivial motif.”⁹

Rembrandt’s religious beliefs remain contested, but not his Bible, which was the Dutch-language *Statenbijbel*, a copy of which remained in his personal library.¹⁰ His Bible naturally included the Christian Scriptures (i.e., New Testament), but he was drawn to the Pentateuch, as were many Dutch contemporaries.¹¹ Moreover, despite his Calvinism, Rembrandt found the Apocrypha (i.e., deuterocanonical texts) a source for recurring studies, including Tobit.¹² It would be patently impossible to do justice to Rembrandt’s vast biblical opus in this short piece, or even his readings of Genesis.¹³ Rembrandt’s enormous corpus of biblical art, approximately forty time-consuming oils and dozens of sketches, includes such classics as *Belshazzar’s Feast*, *Bathsheba Reading King David’s Letter*, *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem*, and *Moses and the Tablets*.¹⁴ Rembrandt’s many renderings of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) alone evidence considerable grappling with this awesome scene. Nevertheless, I hope that the following three examples, all drawn from Genesis, and which his Dutch contemporaries also found deeply moving, will illustrate some of his exegetical tendencies.¹⁵

1) Abraham's Three Visitors (Genesis 18)



Andrei Rublev, *The Trinity*, also titled *The Hospitality of Abraham* (c. 1415)

The ubiquity of Christian typology in both written texts and in art is universally acknowledged. The gist of Christian typology is that the Old Testament hints at the New Testament while the New Testament contains the Old. It seems to me, however, that this formula leaves a lot of leeway as to where the emphasis lies. So, for instance, in Andrei Rublev's justly celebrated fifteenth-century icon *The Trinity*, the three angels who visited Abraham (Genesis 18:1–8) become the fully realized Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, complete with halos and symbolically colored clothing, forming a full circle.¹⁶ Abraham's house, the oak of Mamre, and Mount Moriah are barely visible in the background and tie us back to the Genesis narrative, but that is all. We know from other Trinity icons that *do* include many narrative details of the

Abraham cycle that Genesis 18 was in Rublev's mind as well, otherwise we might not know. Strikingly absent in Rublev are Abraham, Sarah, the meal of curds and calf (an exegetical crux from the standpoint of rabbinic kashrut), and the tension created by Sarah's laughter at receiving this unlikely annunciation.¹⁷ In the words of Prof. Fr. Henri Nouwen, "When we participate in the Hospitality of Abraham to the Lord we discover that we really are responding to 'The Hospitality' of the Trinity." While these are Nouwen's words, they capture the essence of Rublev's icon – and demonstrate how far typology can depart from the Bible's plain sense.¹⁸ By contrast, Rembrandt's small oil, held in a private collection, yet widely known, captures those elements of Genesis 18 which drove rabbinic interest. *Abraham Entertaining the Angels* (1646) internalizes the Dutch Bible's chapter introduction: that "two angels and the Lord Himself appeared to Abraham," but also attends to Abraham's washing of the guests' feet and providing a meal, which one of the angels consumes. A decade later, a Rembrandt etching of this chapter goes farther still, with the two angels fully human, even the Lord now looking like an ordinary human being, and a very aged Abraham serving up the meal. In this later rendering, a more prominent Sarah appears skeptical as well as curious, and there is Ishmael, armed with a bow and arrow! The progression toward a domestic scene is unmistakable. Consistently humanistic, Rembrandt was deeply interested in the founding family, less so in the trinitarian element. One can imagine any Christian mentally connecting the three visitors in Genesis 18 to the Trinity, but invoking "typology" to cover both Rublev and Rembrandt elides some critical differences.



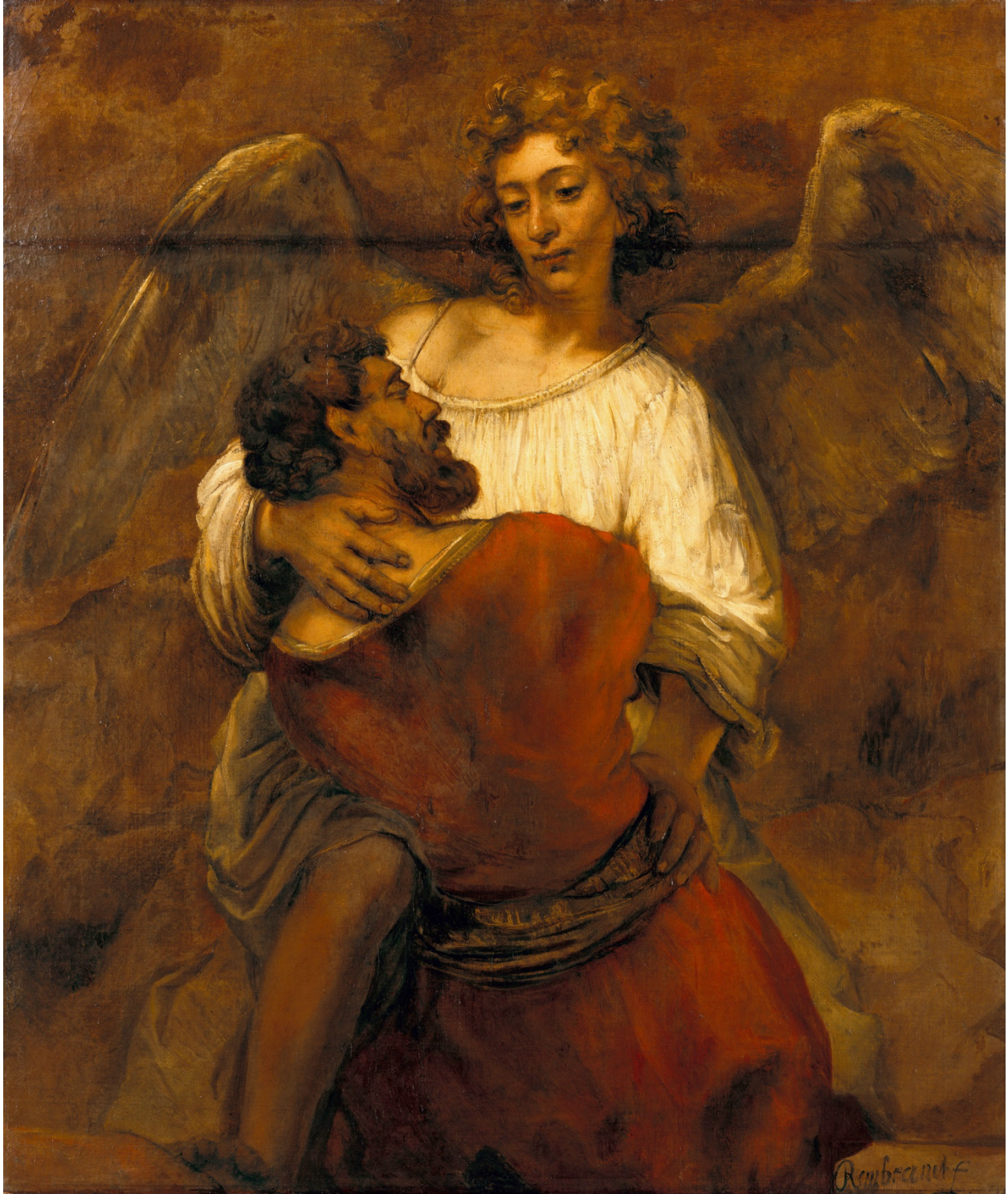
Rembrandt van Rijn, *Abraham Entertaining the Angels* (1646)



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Abraham Entertaining the Angels* (1656)

2) Jacob and the Angel (Genesis 32)

Of course, Rembrandt interpreted “Old Testament” characters through a “New Testament” prism. Michael Zell has demonstrated Rembrandt’s art “as an enactment of a distinctly Protestant piety.”¹⁹ Yet consonant with that cultural return to close reading, Rembrandt carefully considered the actual scenes and characters of the Hebrew Bible. Turning to Rembrandt’s *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (c. 1659), we again find a novel interpretation. Abandoning his contemporaries’ interest in capturing the landscape or the time of day, Rembrandt offers an intense close-up of the key figures.²⁰ This large oil uses brown, red, gold (or as art historians would say, ochre, sienna, and umber) and a thick impasto, the layering of paints. Many contemporaries disliked this style, which lacks the sharpness, design sophistication, etc. of contemporaries like Peter Paul Rubens (d. 1640). In this painting, at least, this impasto technique helps achieve the dream-like quality that Rembrandt sought. Is the Patriarch awake? Art historian Jacob Wisse speculates that Rembrandt may be channeling the view of Maimonides that this encounter is, in fact, a dream.²¹ Rembrandt’s Jacob has his eyes shut, is burly and bearded, but not yet the aged Patriarch we’ll find in the Joseph narrative. The angel here, unlike most renderings before or since, is not so much wrestling Jacob as embracing him. The left (weaker) hand damages the thigh, but as Robert Alter has noted, the verb *naga* usually means “touched,” not “struck,” or “wrenched” as so many translations have it.²² Meanwhile, the angel’s right hand, more fully articulated, lies on Jacob’s bare neck and seems to be pulling Jacob toward him/her. This angel seems to be androgynous despite the masculine grammar; some art historians speculate that the angel bears a resemblance to the face of Rembrandt’s deceased son Titus. This angel has wings, as the iconographic template demands, but the face is all too human. Like Jacob, the angel’s hair is curly and brown, with the white dress visually contrasting with Jacob’s red tunic. Compared to most renderings of this scene, what strikes the viewer is the absence of hostility: Rembrandt’s focus is on their intimacy, the angel’s tenderness toward Jacob, but not on the conflict.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1659)

3) Jacob Blesses Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48)

Jacob's Blessing of Joseph's Sons (1656), captures a dramatic moment in Genesis 48: Joseph brings his Egyptian-born and -bred sons to Jacob, in what many scholars regard as an adoption ceremony.²³ The presentation of the two brothers here has been contested: What do the brothers' faces indicate? While a beatific, blond Ephraim receives the better blessing, Manasseh looks out placidly at the viewer. I do not read the fraternal relationship here as hostile. Rembrandt grasps that this scene concludes Genesis' recurring theme of the younger supplanting the older. Many artists have presented Jacob's hands *as crossed*. Given traditional, typological Christian readings of the Old Testament as foreshadowing the New Testament, and every cross as a crucifix, this interpretation has prevailed. But Rembrandt followed his Dutch *Statenbijbel*, which places Joseph's hand underneath his father's. Once again, wittingly or unwittingly, Rembrandt channels a rabbinic notion. Targum Onkelos renders the verb *sikkel* (48:14) as a noun *sekhel*, "acting wisely," turning a description of hand-placement into a characterization of an aged patriarch who comforts his dubious son, "I know my son, I know" (48:19). Joseph initially objects to Israel's reversal of the birth order but accedes to Jacob's confidence. Intriguingly, this progression is mirrored in x-rays of earlier versions of this painting that show Jacob and Joseph at odds, their heads leaning in opposite directions.

Rembrandt's most striking interpretive innovation is obvious: the woman in the scene. In *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, a *rabbinically* literate reader is likely to insist that the composed woman on the right side of the painting is Asenat, daughter of an Egyptian priest, mentioned three times in the Hebrew Bible as Joseph's wife and Ephraim and Manasseh's mother. Asenat became a full-fledged character in Second Temple and rabbinic literature, a righteous convert to Judaism, who rejected her idolatrous upbringing. It is tempting to over-interpret Rembrandt as a biblical commentator. Rembrandt incorporated Hebrew visually, but he did not read the Bible in Hebrew, nor should we assume he was more than vaguely familiar with the Jewish interpretive tradition. An enthusiastic over-interpreter might insist that Rembrandt knew of the dramatic midrash in *Pesikta Rabbati* in which Asenat's righteousness becomes the clinching rationale for Jacob's blessing.²⁴ Perhaps, but how could this be proven? Rembrandt and other North European painters added women to domestic biblical scenes and portrayed women rather more frequently than their Southern counterparts. We have no evidence that Rembrandt would have known these rabbinic texts, although he likely read his Bible carefully enough to know of her existence, and possibly heard about Asenat's post-biblical career. It seems too minimalist, and too contrarian, to argue that the woman in the painting has no connection to later legend.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph* (1656)

These three examples evidence Rembrandt's commitment to rendering the psychological moment in Genesis and, I suggest, allowing him to move beyond a narrow typological viewpoint. But we should draw the line against overreading Rembrandt as a biblical commentator. He was not "ministerial to the text," to borrow Leo Strauss's formulation. Rembrandt did not hesitate to depart from the biblical text altogether, and while it makes sense to term interpretive leaps in Midrash or Kabbalah as "creative betrayals" (Gershom Scholem's phrase), I would not apply that term to Rembrandt.²⁵ Unlike literary commentators, Jewish and Christian, Rembrandt made no attempt to articulate a particular lesson, a creed, a kerygma. This is more than a function of genre – written text versus visual representation. Certain paintings do seem didactic, such as Pieter Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* (c. 1563) and its sermon against human pride, or Albrecht Dürer's *Expulsion from the Garden* (c. 1510) with its focus on the enormity of the original sin. Going backwards to the most celebrated piece of *Jewish* art of late antiquity, the anonymous fresco at Dura Europos patently extolls the salvific role of women in early Exodus. Human emotion, not theology, remained Rembrandt's North Star. He was not attempting to create a visual counterpart of Calvin's *Institutes* or *Midrash Rabbah*. That statement in no way

diminishes what Rembrandt did do: visualize the internal lives of the characters he knew from his neighbors, his predecessors, and from his Bible.

¹ A. Hyatt Mayor, *Rembrandt and the Bible* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979); Ann Jensen Adams, ed., *New Approaches to Rembrandt: Bathsheba Reading King David's Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Steve Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009).

² The Calvinists were hostile to dissenters, especially to the Remonstrants, and put the esteemed statesmen Johannes Oldenbarnevelt to death for his support of their efforts. A generation later, a mob inflamed by Dutch nationalists murdered Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt, to the disgust of Spinoza. Amsterdam was no Eden. Religious affiliation during the Dutch seventeenth-century was a moving target. To take one instance: the poet Joost van den Vondel's parents were originally Catholic, but became Anabaptist, Vondel's original faith. Vondel became a supporter of the Protestant Remonstrants, then converted back to Catholicism later in life. See Judith Pollman, "Vondel's Religion," in *Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679): Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age*, ed. Jan Bloemendal and Frans-Willem Korsten (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 85–100.

³ Jonathan Israel, *Spinoza: Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Steve Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999/2018); R. Po-chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop, eds., *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴ Jan Lievens, Rembrandt pupils Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck, and Aert de Gelder all painted Hebrew Bible episodes that included accurate depictions of Sephardic Jews.

⁵ On the remarkable ordinariness of Dutch Jews, see Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, 42–103. Cf. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not: How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?," in *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 25–68. Cohen concludes that for the Greco-Roman period one would *not* know someone was Jewish by sight alone. I believe this applies equally for many periods and places in Jewish history.

⁶ See Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*. *The Jewish Bride* illustrates a two-fold problem. First, there is nothing that confirms the young couple are Jewish. Second, as was often the case with Rembrandt, the title was appended to the painting much later.

⁷ Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, eds., *Philosemitism in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) offers an excellent collection of essays on this topic, including a couple on Dutch philosemitism. Fascination with Hebrew and affection for Jewry should not be equated. Philosemitism often contains an ambivalent element: sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explained that "allosemitism," the long-standing tradition of attributing special qualities to Jews, precedes both antisemitism and philosemitism and can lead to either or both tendencies.

⁸ Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*.

⁹ Steve Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, 129.

¹⁰ Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt's Reading: The Artist's Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003). Golahny's book documents the high level of

literacy and learning in the Dutch Republic and locates Rembrandt in a specific Humanist circle. Rembrandt's library was a modest one compared to his wealthier, more establishment contemporary Peter Paul Rubens. See Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 463.

¹¹ Anthony Smith, *The Nation Made Real*, 36–39.

¹² When it came to Apocrypha, Rembrandt's Italian Catholic counterparts, including Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi, seem to have preferred rendering Judith beheading Holofernes. Then again, so did the Jewish-born Austrian Art Nouveau master, Gustav Klimt.

¹³ In *Belshazzar's Feast* (c. 1635), Rembrandt was indisputably intrigued by the writing on the wall, as the biblical narrator intended. That the vertical writing was informed by midrashic tradition, as conveyed to Rembrandt by Menasseh ben Israel in an earlier work seems likely. But to infer that Rembrandt was aware of the Hebrew double-entendre of *paras*, meaning both Persia the country (a noun) and *paras* "to cut up" or "slice" (a verb), assumes far too much.

¹³ Esther, a perennial favorite for Jews and other underdogs, naturally spoke to artists in the beleaguered Dutch Republic. See the traveling exhibit, *The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt*, catalogue by Abigail Rapoport (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025).

¹⁴ Meir Soloveichik, "Rembrandt's Great Jewish Painting," *Tikvah Ideas*, June 10, 2016; <https://ideas.tikvah.org/meirsoloveichik/essays/rembrandts-great-jewish-painting?queryID=13b216434c21b9edbd2163f1bb7abfda>.

¹⁵ Rembrandt's teacher, Pieter Lastman, depicted many Old Testament scenes, often innovatively. Lastman may have been the first artist to portray Balaam's Ass (Numbers 22:22–35). If true, that would be a remarkable fact, since there are only two talking animals in the Hebrew Bible, and artists had represented the talking serpent in Genesis 3 hundreds of times. The many presentations of the Genesis 3 serpent as female constitute misogyny unsupported by Hebrew grammar: *nahash* is a masculine noun. Balaam's perceptive she-ass (*aton*), by contrast, is feminine.

¹⁶ I thank Dr. Malka Simkovich for calling my attention to Andrei Rublev's celebrated icon alternately called "The Hospitality of Abraham" or "The Trinity" (c. 1415).

¹⁷ Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*.

¹⁸ Henri Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1987), 20–22.

¹⁹ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 192.

²⁰ Jacob Wisse makes this key comparison between Rembrandt and his contemporaries in his superb lecture series, "The Artistic Legacy of the Hebrew Bible," in *Tikvah Ideas*; <https://ideas.tikvah.org/courses/the-artistic-legacy-of-the-hebrew-bible>. Ann Jensen Adams notes that other Dutch painters, including Jan Lievens and Aert de Gelder, painted similar close-ups of biblical characters.

²¹ Wisse, "The Artistic Legacy," above. See also Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, II:42, pp. 388–390 in the Shlomo Pines translation.

²² Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 179, n. 26.

²³ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Bereshit/Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 324–327.

²⁴ Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, 51.

²⁵ On the nature of the relationship between the artist and the biblical text, I disagree with Bal's judgment: "So, clearly the paintings respond to the story, but they do not copy, illustrate or visualize it as it is presented in the Bible. Rather, they propose a counter-reading, a displacement

of interests, a shift in emphasis and affect. In fact, the paintings suggest the position that feminist literary theory has termed resistant reading” (*Reading Rembrandt*, 37). Bal’s postmodern approach to the Bible resists privileging its authority over against its interpreters, but these interpreters (e.g., rabbinic, Church fathers, artists) would concede this (biblical) authority. Second, Bal implicitly ignores the singular cultural role that the Bible occupies. Finally, Bal assumes an oppositional stance. While Rembrandt was at odds with the Church establishment, that disgruntlement would characterize many Bible readers in most eras.