Rembrandt– Biblical Interpreter

Ruth Dorot

The School of Architecture, Ariel University
POB 3, Kiryat Hamada, Ariel, Israel
E-mail address: sf_moshed@bezeqint.net
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1884-1743

Abstract

Aim. This article seeks to show that Rembrandt is the most profound, comprehensive and reliable interpreter – not an illustrator – of the Old Testament: "His ability… makes him one of the great visual interpreters of Scripture… a theologian not by academic degree but in his very nature" (Parker, 1994, p. 28). It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate the acute difference between Rembrandt's depictions of Old Testament events and those by other artists who merely converted the overtly stated text in the Holy Bible into the visual medium.

Methods. The case for claiming that Rembrandt interpreted rather than merely depicted the Old Testament will be made by analysing five of his works and the comparison to others portraying the same events. Rembrandt's unique methods and techniques such as adding or omitting certain figures or details, using chiaroscuro extensively and deviating from expected iconography will be demonstrated as he unearths the core significance of each event.

Results. This article manifests how Rembrandt whose production of artwork relating to Old Testament scenes was prolific did not merely depict Old Testament scenes but rather interpreted the deeper, psychological meanings of the subjects involved and events portrayed, exhibiting a profound understanding of the messages in the original Hebrew text.

Conclusion. The article unfolds Rembrandt's significant artistic accomplishments surpassing those who preceded or succeeded him. It reveals the different means he used in each painting expressing its high point according to Old Testament interpretation rather than through the prism of the New Testament.

Key words: Old Testament, Jewish Scripture, psychology, illustration, interpretation, human spirit, verbal and visual documentation, chiaroscuro

Across the generations, the Old Testament (Bible) has been an endless source of inspiration for many painters and sculptors. At first glance, it would seem fairly straightforward to convert a biblical story from written text to a painting or a sculpture (Dorot, 2013). However, such a task may involve several hurdles; for example, how does one convey in a single painting or sculpture a story or an event that is described across several

verses or even chapters? How did European artists in the past deal with the portrayal of people, places, landscapes and the Middle Eastern background and clothing of the biblical period they had never seen? After all, they had no relevant verbal or visual documentation to refer to, since up until the 19th century, hardly any artists ever travelled from Europe to the Land of Israel. Moreover, European artists worked with translated versions of the biblical text, another issue that poses a serious problem, since these versions had lost some of their original meanings and reflected the understandings and interpretations of the translator.

As a result of the above, the plastic arts depictions of biblical scenes by European artists employed a number of techniques to overcome these knowledge gaps, three of which are elaborated on below.

The illustrative approach – involves converting the written words into shapes and colours that compose a plastic work of art. This approach illustrates the story, rendering it more tangible. A prominent example is the work of Gustave Doré, whose many engravings provide a generally realistic portrayal of biblical stories and scenes. In *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (Doré, 1855), he chose palm trees and prickly pear bushes – typical landscape of the region of the Land of Israel as he did when illustrating *The Trial of Abraham's Faith* (Doré, c. 1880). These works decorate or illustrate the Bible, but rather than suggest any profound explanation, they offer nothing more than what is overt in the story itself – the literal biblical text.

The adaptive approach – The biblical story is adapted to the artist's location or to the artistic conventions of his time. Nicolas Poussin's (1648) painting of *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* is a typical example. Poussin endows this biblical scene with a neo-classical dimension by clearly introducing neo-classical architecture, figures in dresses with falling folds, and prominent use of rounded jugs. It would be difficult to assume this is what the architecture, Eliezer, Rebecca or the other maidens actually looked like by the well. The resulting image is hardly authentic; Poussin simply cast his biblical scene into a design template typical of his style and his milieu.

The syllogistic approach – The artist connects to a particular biblical story in which he finds inspiration and a moral lesson to be learned for his era or his social environment, where the human and spiritual wealth embedded in the story is not just a descriptive source or an expression of faith, but rather serves as a social comment or protest. One such example is Pieter Brueghel's *The Tower of Babel* (1563) – a scene depicting the height of human arrogance.

Unlike other artists, Rembrandt analyses Old Testament events emphasising "their personal, philosophical and profound psychological aspects" (Schama, 1999, p. 179), including the deepest emotions of the human soul "as he infused his Old Testament scenes with his passion and intensity" (Wallace, 1968, p. 162). They come across as highly humanised portraits drawn from a deep familiarity with Hebrew literature. "While other art-

ists painted the Bible, Rembrandt painted Jewish Scripture… his interpretations of some stories are said to come from later rabbinical writings that he learned about from his Jewish acquaintances" (Nadler, 2003, p. 45).

Rembrandt simply would not allow his access to Scripture to be limited by any set of restrictions, whether imposed by the dogmas of the theologians or the notions of preachers. Kenneth Clark's summary indicates that the Bible was *his* Bible, that part of the Holy Writ which supported his own convictions and those episodes that illustrated his own feelings about human life depending on Divine intervention (Durham, 2004). Rembrandt was indeed free of all these constraints, and displayed a sense of loyalty to what was essential to the Jewish spirit of the Old Testament which he managed to understand. Rembrandt's biblical figures resemble the biblical forefathers, as well as the Jewish characters the artist encountered in the Jewish Breedstraat in Amsterdam, where he also lived.

Eduard Koloff developed an elaborately historical and analytic structure both to interpret and valorise Rembrandt's fascination with the Jews of Amsterdam as models for his art. Koloff claimed that the city's Jewish population served the artist as a kind of archaeological site for exploring the concerns of modern history painting. Whenever he had to treat biblical characters, the Jews of his time were always present in his mind, clothed with long robes and coats. The allure of Rembrandt's Jewish neighbours lay in their authenticity as descendants of the biblical patriarchs (Koloff, 1920). A scholar of seventeenth century Dutch art Michael Zell added that "in turning to the Jews as models for his representations of Old Testament types, Rembrandt intended to be totally earnest and honest…and truly believed that he had found a naturalistic depiction of Old Testament stories in real life" (Zell, 2002, p. 185).

Another confirmation of Rembrandt's using the figures of the Jews in his immediate surroundings as models for his biblical works came from Franz Landsberger (1946), who stated that the artist never wearied in his devotion to biblical themes as subjects for his paintings and other graphic presentations, and in those portrayals, he was the first to have the courage to use the Jews of his environment as models for the heroes of the sacred narratives. To him, the Jews were the people of the Bible.

About one-third of all Rembrandt's works depicts Old Testament scenes – a number far greater than for any other artist: 160 oil paintings, 80 engravings and over 600 drawings. This large number of works is especially worthy of note given the fact that at that time there was little commercial demand for biblical scenes, and therefore it would seem that it was the artist's personal choice to deal with them so extensively. English art historian Simon Schama in his book *Rembrandt's Eyes* explains: "Thus, from whatever angle we regard these statistics, there can be little doubt that Rembrandt's prodigious activity in the field of religious art was mainly due to his own inclination and not to the patrons' demands or the art market's" (Schama, 1999, p. 170).

The fact that Rembrandt revisited biblical themes using various techniques is an indication that he must have dealt with the Scriptures very frequently. In Margaret Parker's lecture: *Rembrandt*: *The Artist As Theologian* (1994) she concurs that the sheer number of Rembrandt's drawings on Biblical themes, and the fact that he explores the same scenes over and over again across the span of a lifetime, reveal him as a man who lived every day with the scriptures: "There is no doubt that the scenes from the Bible were as real and vital to him as the lives of his neighbors. … He peoples the scenes from the Bible with the women and men of his acquaintance" (Parker, 1994, p. 28).

Biblical themes might be considered equal in importance to the historical and mythological themes that constitute part of Rembrandt's extensive works, but the former remains more prominent while the latter two constitute a relatively negligible part of the scope of his work. Austrian art historian Otto Benesch in his book *Rembrandt as a Draughtsman* believes this to be the case: "He clearly possessed a deep religious sensitivity which enabled him to translate a fascinating impression of life immediately into biblical vision" (Benesch, 1960, p. 160).

An obvious question is: what factors influenced Rembrandt and made him the "distinctive Protestant interpreter of Scripture"? (Zell, 2002, p. 1). Rembrandt, like his countrymen in the 17th century, a time when the Netherlands was at its political and artistic peak, a time known as "the Jewish period" – was very close to the Old Testament out of a sense of identification with the Jewish people and their destiny. Rudolf Kayser in an article in the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* wrote: "From the Old Testament and the Jews of Holland, Rembrandt drew inspiration and materials for his art" (Kayser, 1933, p. 10).

The Dutch saw themselves as paralleling the Chosen People and their struggle against the Spanish as parallel to the struggle of the Israelites in Egypt against Pharaoh. Rembrandt breathed life into his biblical figures using not only Jews but also members of his own family as models for his figures. Therefore, "There remains the indisputable fact that the artist's attitude toward the Jewish people was an unusually sympathetic one" (Rosenberg, 1968, p. 61).

The young Rembrandt was particularly impressed by the dramatic stories of the Bible, which described violence and grand gestures. From the 1640s on, he increased his interest in the meaning of human emotions. In Parker's words: "We find increasingly the sense of introspection, the spirit of compassion, the interest in depicting the life of the spirit, the ability to convey the intimate moment of contact with God. Clearly, we are witness to a remarkable spiritual journey" (Parker, 1994, p. 29).

Were it not for Rembrandt's ties to the Jewish community in Amsterdam, one might wonder about the significance of his closeness to the Old Testament and to Hebrew. Tracing Rembrandt's use of incidental Hebrew inscriptions from the early years in Leiden to the mature paintings in the

later phases of his life taking advantage of the scholarly circle of Christian and Jewish intellectuals in Amsterdam has shown how this theme attracted him throughout his artistic career. Going beyond the desire of many Renaissance and Baroque artists to imbue works with a historic-authentic dimension, Rembrandt kept developing and perfecting his use of Hebrew. From meaningless ornaments in the early works, his inscriptions gradually became more and more significant (Sabar, 2008).

Much has been said about how well he knew the Jews, and about the fact that he lived among them delighted in finding on Breestraat a naturalistic depiction of Old Testament stories in real life as American philosopher Steven Nadler observes in his book *Rembrandt's Jews*: "His portrayals of Jews are supposed to express an unprecedented empathy between artist and subject and a remarkable emotional tenderness … Their history, their legends, and especially their faces were recurring and important themes in his art" (Nadler, 2003, p. 44).

Because of this physical proximity to the Jewish community, he could feel the tragedy of the Jews and express it as no artist had done before him, for no artist had delved so deeply into human suffering and into the innermost feelings of the human soul. Leonid Pasternak the Russian post--impressionist painter wrote in his book *Rembrandt: His Art and its Value for Jews and Judaism*: "In truth, in the long succession of ages and up to the present, neither in Jewry itself nor among the people who have been singing the praise of Jewry, has there been an artist more 'Jewish' than the Great Rembrandt" (Pasternak, 1923, p. 11). He further added that were it not for the circumstances of Rembrandt's non-Jewish ethnic background "there would be everything in him for him to be considered a Jewish national artist, for of all the great painters no one came so close to the spirit of the Bible as Michelangelo and especially Rembrandt" (Pasternak, 1923, p. 12). The Jewish community in Amsterdam originated mainly in the Jews and crypto-Jews of Spain and Portugal who arrived in Amsterdam after their expulsion, and also a minority of Ashkenazi Jews who came mainly from Germany and later from Poland – survivors of the pogroms. An example of his close contacts with his Jewish neighbours and acquaintances can be seen in his *Supper at Emmaus* "where a braided Challah - bread used for the Jewish Sabbath and holidays… was displayed on the table. … and the bread would have been pervasive in Amsterdam with a great influx of Ashkenazim into the city around 1648" (Perlove & Silver, 2009, p. 213). Thanks to the religious tolerance in the Netherlands at that time, the Jews felt safe and flourished both culturally and economically. Zell adds that the repeated invocations of a rapprochement between Jews and Christians were inspired by Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel's involvement during these years with a group of Protestant theologians known as "philosemites" or "philo-Judaists". These Protestants advocated a compassionate attitude towards Jews in the hope of demonstrating that Christianity was not Judaism's adversary but its absolute fulfilment (Zell, 2000). Rembrandt encountered

different types of Jews including the prominent leaders of the community in addition to Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel (Landsberger, 1946) whose book *La Piedra Gloriosa* he illustrated, and Dr. Efraim Bonus, through whom he most probably gained an in-depth knowledge of the Old Testament as well as learning about other treasures of Judaism and the Hebrew language (Knotter, 1999).

Rembrandt, who had been a Catholic as a young man, later converted and became a Calvinist Protestant (Gerson, 1968) – the predominant religion in the Dutch Republic ever since its liberation from the burden of Spanish rule. At that time, he became further acquainted with the Old Testament, since the Calvinist approach was more closely aligned with Jewish thought. Calvinism encouraged interest in the Old Testament as the history of the Chosen People – the nation of the Bible – and Rembrandt followed and was influenced by this approach, even though he also placed emphasis on humanism and psychology. Two key points common to Judaism and Calvinism are modesty and the avoidance of the use of human figures to represent God or Jesus. Calvin forbade the use of art for ritual purposes, hence the famed austerity of Dutch churches – an approach shared by the Jews, since the use of human figures in the synagogue was similarly proscribed and the amount of decoration in general, limited. Simon Schama further clarifies: "It was his conviction that figural representations of God or of Christ degrade the Divine through humanization. The severe simplicity of Holland's churches, with their complete lack of decoration, still reflects Calvinistic austerity in its original form" (Schama, 1999, p. 169).

Examination of Rembrandt's biblical works, which are discussed in this article according to the appearance of the scenes in the Old Testament reveals the range of interpretive techniques he employs as suggested below:

- Analysis of the biblical text from a perspective that embraces humanism, psychology and philosophy.
- Deviation or digression from the biblical text: "In his hands, visual artistry is privileged as a means of articulating and producing theological meaning.… Rembrandt even prioritized the image over scriptural authority… giving primacy to the visual image as a means of transmitting and generating theological meaning" (Zell, 2002, p. 193). Another technique employed is adding or omitting details or figures as Zell emphasizes: "Protestantism may have exalted the Word as the sole authority in the religious realm, but Rembrandt's biblical images transcend such strictures" (Zell, 2002, p. 164).
- Symbolic, psychological, philosophical or spiritual use of light and shade: As the master of light and shade, Rembrandt floods his biblical scenes with the technique of chiaroscuro. The term refers to a strong juxtaposition of the two, contrasting and manipulating them – resulting in a stunning, visually arresting, psychologically evocative paintings. These specific effects have become trademarks of his style: dramatic intensity, rhythmic visual harmony and unfathomable psychological

depth imbuing his figures with a sense of glowing enthusiasm or a sense of gloom and mystery.
- Deviating from expectations – departure from the iconography and accepted and expected conventions of the period or the topic.
- Foreshadowing through body language, place portrayal or symbolic use of objects.
- Bridging knowledge gaps – filling missing information for the reader of the biblical text.
- Expanding the boundaries of a certain event and linking it to the past and to the future by integrating objects, facial expressions or other hints.
- Use of additional Jewish sources outside the biblical text such as the Talmud, the Midrash and the Agadda, etc.
- It should be noted that where other artists employed similar techniques, they did not do so in the spirit of the Scriptures, and quite often distanced themselves from that spirit.
- The following five paintings by Rembrandt, each of which will employ at least one of the above-mentioned techniques, will illustrate how Rembrandt demonstrated his religious fervour, his vision of the divine and more importantly his fidelity to the spirit of the Old Testament and will show how he differs from others in his interpretations.

In Rembrandt's painting *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (van Rijn, 1659), contrary to all conventions, the struggle has disappeared. Despite its dramatic and theatrical qualities that are so characteristic of the Baroque period, the artist shows no interest in this aspect of the event. Instead, his interest lies in the implications and outcomes of this seminal encounter. As an interpreter of the Old Testament, he presents the high point of the non-violent meeting between the two adversaries: the benediction (Landsberger, 1946). According to the text, at dawn the angel asks Jacob to be released from his grip – a fact that says much about the latter's physical strength. In return for the release, Jacob seeks a blessing from the angel who recognises the qualities of the man holding him and in turn grants him a new name – Israel.

In the Old Testament, the giving or changing of a name bears symbolic significance. An earlier important example of such a change is that of Avram's name to Avra**h**am (Hebrew for Abraham). The added Hebrew letter *heh* (similar in sound to H in English) that God adds to Avram's name empowers Abraham and makes him the "father of many nations". In later Jewish tradition it became common practice to add a name. For example, the name Chaim ("life" in Hebrew) is added to a sick man to symbolise longevity. In this resolution of the encounter between Jacob and the heavenly messenger, the new name is an indication of Jacob's new identity – the name of the nation to come, which bestows the qualities of bravery and courage, indicating that the encounter between Jacob-Israel and the Holy Spirit is supernatural. In this scene, Israel is born, his power and strength reinforced

despite the physical injury to his hip. The consequences of this struggle for the future of the nation – Israel – are that when forced to, the nation will be able to overcome all those who rise up against it. It is worth noting that the letters of the name "Israel" in Hebrew contain the first letters of the names of all three patriarchs and all four matriarchs rendering it a name of profound significance.

Since Rembrandt's focus is not on the struggle but on its outcome – the granting of the blessing and of the name – he stages the scene quite differently and even contrary to the observer's expectations, as rather than a physical conflict, he portrays an almost sensual embrace between heaven and earth, reminiscent of a dance between a man and a woman. The embrace contrasts the pale, gentle, lyrical angel robed in a spiritual white, with the dark and muscular Jacob robed in a strong, sensual red. The angel's one hand is placed over the nape of Jacob's neck, while the other lies on his hip. The angel gazes tenderly at Jacob as the outstretched wings seem to shield him, adding a spiritual ambience to the scene. The face of the angel is especially noteworthy here: "it shows no trace of physical exertion but only compassion for Jacob" (Munz & Haak, 1984, p. 132).

Before blessing his twelve sons – later to become the twelve tribes – Jacob-Israel blesses his two grandsons, Ephraim and Menasseh, Joseph's sons. In his painting *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph* (van Rijn, 1656), Rembrandt paints Jacob, the venerable patriarch, as a somewhat enfeebled old man, his thick flowing beard as white as snow; supported on his bed, his eyes are dim and weary with age, he is almost sightless, but his face is softened by sorrow and tender with love. The written text does not explain Jacob's preference for Ephraim, the younger grandson, but Rembrandt, who grasps the true spirit of the biblical text, supports this preference, justifying it through the use of several devices: he paints Menasseh as an ordinary-looking child, as opposed to the fair-haired curly-headed Ephraim, whose features are angelic, delicate, soft and lyrical, and who is depicted with the hint of a halo over his bowed head. Ephraim resembles Titus, the artist's beloved and sensitive son, a choice indicative of the artist's identification with Jacob's choice. Ephraim's eyes are downcast in humility and because of the solemnity of the occasion; he is kneeling and his body language bespeaks of giving. In fact, his whole being suggests submission and acceptance as he respectfully bends forward, with his hands devoutly crossed over his chest. A parallel exists between Ephraim's crossed hands in this painting – a gesture that is *not* mentioned in the biblical text – and the crossing of Jacob's hands at the time of the blessing, which *does* appear in the text, but *not* in the painting. The similarity of the crossed-hands position is indicative of the proximity between Jacob and Ephraim – one that is enhanced when the artist emphasises the glowing triangle of white light on Jacob's head. This pure, eternal, divine illumination originates from within – (since no source is visible) – and most probably derives from the blessing he received from God. The glowing brightness passes to Ephraim's forehead and from

there to his heart. With these elements, Rembrandt strongly suggests the choice of the one suited to receive the blessing of the firstborn instead of the firstborn himself. This scene alludes to and is a reminder of the blessing of the firstborn that Esau was deserving of but that Jacob himself deceitfully received from his father Isaac, just as the reference to the past is revealed in the heavy fur shawl covering his shoulders, serving as a reminder of his brother Esau's hairy body. This parallel is strengthened by the gentle figure of Ephraim resembling the gentleness of Jacob as a young man about whom it was said: "Jacob was a quiet man dwelling in tents", unlike his brother Esau who "became a skillful hunter and a husbandman" (King James Bible, 1611, Gen 25:27). The artist wished to emphasise Jacob's choice of Ephraim over Menasseh. The Old Testament tells us that Jacob crossed his hands over the heads of his two grandsons deliberately reversing the traditional order in which the elders blessed the first and second born children. Rembrandt, however, wishing to justify and support Jacob's choice of Ephraim, completely abandons the biblical narrative by painting only one arm – the right arm which is usually used for blessings – and is used here to bless Ephraim. It is worth mentioning that "One of the few artists before Rembrandt to depict Jacob blessing his grandsons without crossing his hands is Holbein" (Bar-Efrat, 1987, p. 595).

This divergence from the Scriptures – the omission of the other arm – highlights the notion that the blessing bestowed upon the younger child is so far superior to that granted to the firstborn, that the artist saw no need to even paint the other arm. Contrary to Catholic tradition, which deemed the crossing of the hands to be a pre-figuration of the crucifixion of Christ, Rembrandt completely dismisses this approach by eliminating the crossing of the hands. "The omission of the feature of Jacob's crossed arms, Haussherr argues, signifies Rembrandt's deliberate break from the canonical Christian allusion to the Crucifixion…In Haussherr's judgement the painting reflects Jewish messianic doctrine" (Zell, 2002, p. 164). When choosing to bless the younger child with the blessing of the firstborn, the patriarch lays his hand lightly upon Ephraim's head. As he does so, Joseph supports his father's arm, "Joseph offers Jacob a gently supportive gesture, suggesting that he contentedly accepts the justness of his father's choice to bless the younger grandson" (Zell, 2002, p. 62).

Even though the biblical text indicates that he is displeased at the reversed blessing and attempts to annul the inversion by directing his father's arm away from Ephraim and guiding it towards Menasseh. Understandably, Joseph is torn between filial respect and fatherly solicitude. In the text, Jacob refuses to be diverted from his purpose, informing his son that he is aware of the hand's position and that Menasseh, too, will be blessed, though his younger brother's blessing will be greater in quality and dimension. "He shall become a people, and he also shall be great; truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations" (King James Bible, 1611, Gen 48:19). Rashi, the great medieval interpreter

and commentator, relates to the wording of the scene. The Bible uses the word "sikkel" the Hebrew meaning of which is: he crossed his hands. The root letters of the word S/K/L are also the root letters of the words wisdom and understanding in Hebrew. Shimon Bar Efrat agrees with Rashi's interpretation, which speaks to Jacob's response to Joseph's intervention. Jacob clarifies that in spite of his failing eyesight, he is well aware of his actions, for his wisdom and cognitive powers are intact. All this is possible, claims Rashi because the root S/K/L is identical in both meanings: crossed his hands and used his wisdom (Bar-Efrat, 1987). By departing from the text regarding the position of Joseph's hand in the painting, Rembrandt confirms his support of the biblical text in which Jacob's preference of Ephraim seems to be prophetic.

Rembrandt, who, as it has been mentioned before, adds or omits items from the biblical text in order to emphasise the biblical truth and thence reach the essence of the story, includes the figure of Joseph's wife Asenath, daughter of Potiphera. This highly unusual addition is a bold deviation from the customary representation of the subject matter. As in the Old Testament, Rembrandt depicts a family of three generations: Jacob the grandfather, Joseph the son and Ephraim and Menasseh, the two grandsons. One may assume that the artist felt the lack of the female branch – the wife, the mother, the bride. By including the maternal but troubled and pensive Asenath, Rembrandt creates a significant portrait of family unity and familial love at a serene, sacred and dramatic moment. This he achieves by subordinating the narrative to the poignant depiction of the human condition and is inclined to portray the family as a unit in historical scenes showing the husband and wife together, though the written source did not mention them (Tumpel, 2006). According to Rembrandt, who was influenced by the rising status of women in Dutch society (Buettner, 2011) not only was Asenath, Joseph's wife, providing emotional support and sustenance to her husband at a distressing moment, but she apparently represented the importance of the role of women at that time, when the elevated and valued role of an educating mother immensely affected her children. On this solemn family occasion – at a most intimate moment – of saying farewell to the father of the dynasty on his deathbed – a solemnity reflected by the heavy folds of the curtains – the wife is also present in the picture as an emotional and spiritual companion and colleague alongside her husband (Schama, 1987). This is evident in the gentle and grave expression on her face and as she looks on the proceedings her eyes speak eloquently of the deepest love, pride and concern. Legend has it that Asenath was considered to be a woman endowed with "the tall strength of Sarah, the charm of Rebecca and the beauty of Rachel" (Liptzin, 1985, p. 63), and thus it was fitting that Rembrandt chose her to symbolise the female strength. The family unity is further reinforced by Joseph's positioning in the painting next to his father, his countenance conveying affection and profound tenderness. This juxtaposition of father and son is not mentioned in the text,

since Joseph probably stood facing his father with his two sons, but in the painting, it creates a unity of content in terms of its composition.

One of the more psychology-oriented themes in the Old Testament is the description of the complex relationship between King Saul and David, Israel's future king. Being a psychologist at heart, Rembrandt chose to depict the particular incident describing Saul's deep depression and acute mentally unbalanced state after the star of his glory has dimmed and David had been universally acclaimed following the slaying of Goliath. In his early work *David Plays before Saul* (van Rijn, 1630), the artist relates to Saul's jealousy and mental instability as he finds comfort in the music of the harp rendered by young David. Saul fills most of the painting, swathed in a billowing regal cloak that gives him an air of self-importance, with an elegant oriental turban from which a feather rises, signifying arrogance. Saul's fist is grasping his upright shining spear, suggesting a certain belligerence. The aggressive expression on his troubled, tortured face as he glances mistrustfully at the youth reflects the madness of his plotting against his young rival, foreshadowing imminent danger and the "violent outburst about to occur" (Durham, 2004, p. 147). Hidden and bent over in a corner sits David, small in stature, his illuminated hands plucking the strings of the harp.

Rembrandt, who was referred to by Heinrich Goethe as "Der Denker" – the philosopher – (Osterkamp, 2003, p. 502), is equally worthy of the title of "psychologist". In his later painting *David Plays before Saul* (van Rijn, 1656), once again Rembrandt reveals, to a much greater degree than in his earlier version, his profound understanding of the psychology underlying the relationship between Saul and David. In this latter version of the scene, the artist should have focused on Saul's therapeutic process and mental healing. However, the work depicts half-mad, violent Saul, who has fallen into a state of deep depression, in pain and weeping, for an evil spirit from the Lord has plagued him while David is completely absorbed in his music. With his head averted, he is teary-eyed revealing the grief that assails him but there is no hatred in his visible eye. Schama further relates the drama: "Another, more sinister feeling, though, is stirring within him. His uncovered eye, wide open and darkly brooding, betrays his inner torment" (Schama, 1999, p. 228).

Grasping at the dark and heavy curtain that isolates him, forming a barrier between him and David – symbolising his loneliness – he wipes a tear away. It may be that his tears are caused not only by the melancholy that overwhelms him but also by the solitude of his life. It is possible that he is also overcome by the solace he seeks and finds inspired by soothing sounds of the harp that pluck at his heartstrings (Landsberger, 1946). He is moved to the depths of his soul as his evil spirit is darkened with sorrow and his madness is dissolved in tears.

The artist presents the confrontation between old and anguished Saul, though there is no sign of impending violence in his face, and the youthful David through a set of contrasts between the King of Israel, who takes up

about two-thirds of the painting and fills the space to the top, but with no suggestion of self-awareness or condescension, and David, recently taken away from his flock, sitting humbly and withdrawn in a corner. The contrasts between the two are evident not only in their relative size but also in their body language. The King, still in regal costume, is weary, bent over, suggesting apathy, concession, sorrow, despair and depression, his gaze staring off into the distance, suggesting deep reflection, anticipating death. David, on the other hand, on the threshold of life, is calm, absorbed in his playing, his expression focused and attentive as his nimble fingers pluck the strings of the harp, possibly entertaining dreams of an illustrious future. By placing them at either side of the painting, Rembrandt seems to foretell the coming rivalry with its muddied relationship. He emphasises the subtext of these two figures: the current King of Israel versus the young man destined to replace him: the king is a slender man, with curved nose and a black beard, in whose countenance are graven lines of melancholy that appear to be permanently fixed in the features. Even in David, there is a certain melancholy revealed, but above all else a sense of a profound preoccupation. He might be absorbed in the melodies he lures from the harp; or is he swayed by dreams of an illustrious future? For this humble, withdrawn youth playing upon the harp, shall one day grasp an opportunity placing him upon a royal throne (Landsberger, 1946).

From the title of the painting and its theme, one might expect the music, which is therapeutic for the king, to be the topic of the painting, with Rembrandt portraying the results of the healing process. As mentioned in the introduction, Rembrandt was well-versed in the Old Testament and probably knew that the young David had already been anointed king before it was publicly known: "Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward" (King James Bible, 1611, 1 Sam 16:13). In this painting, Rembrandt foretells the changing of the guard between Saul and David rather than just the story of the healing. He stresses the contrast between the two through the light falling on Saul's spear, which is placed diagonally downwards, as opposed to the brightly illuminated upward--pointing frame of David's harp. Saul's drooping shoulders and his feeble--looking hand in a downward slant are in clear contrast to David's relatively large hands symbolising dynamic mobility and agility. From the top of Saul's splendid and colourful turban peeks a shiny but tiny crown – a symbol of his decline from greatness and the end of his rule. In contrast, light falls on David's curls, like a diadem – a sign of his future rise to the throne.

It seems that Rembrandt used this dramatic and theatrical situation of David playing for Saul as a therapeutic measure to bring to the fore the two main aspects of their relationship: in the earlier painting, Rembrandt chose to place the emphasis on the sick, plotting Saul, something that would haunt David until Saul's tragic death. In the later work, Rembrandt provi-

des an overview of their complex past relationship, together with an almost prophetic statement of what the future holds. The dark shadows across the picture "intensify the mood of impending explosion; it seems that in another instant Saul's hand, relaxed on his javelin, will clench, and he will hurl the weapon with intent to 'smite David even to the wall with it'" (King James Bible, 1611, 1 Sam 16:18; Wallace, 1968, p. 175). The sombre colours seem to hint at future events including Saul's tragic demise. This painting is an encounter between intense urges and emotions such as love, jealousy fear and wrath. The text tells us that Saul loved David: "And David came to Saul, and stood before him: and he loved him greatly" (King James Bible, 1611, 1 Sam 16:21). As it may be assumed, he loved him especially as the hero who saved Israel from Goliath. At the same time, Saul feared David's rising power for God has bestowed his favour on him as he had withdrawn it from Saul creating an understandable fierce inner struggle. Rembrandt's deep psychological understanding of human nature yielded a work of art that tells us much beyond the event of therapy by music. "The 'evil spirit' that possessed Saul caused him to vacillate between gentle, repentant lucidity and furious, uncontrolled lunacy" (Wallace, 1968, p. 162). Rembrandt, then, depicts:

> The outer Saul of 1629-1630, all anger and bitter violence, who has given way in 1658-1659 to the inner Saul … with his hand resting, relaxed upon the weapon he is later to use in an attempt to kill David. (Durham, 2004, p. 148)

In *Belshazaar's Feast* (van Rijn, 1635), one of Rembrandt's early works, the mood is one of alarm caused by the appearance of a Vision; a terrifying apparition. This scene depicting the royal banquet reveals the artist's interest in Hebrew script. The dramatic supernatural words that appear on the wall are written by a mysterious, human-looking divine hand emerging out of a "sleeve" of a gray cloud illuminated by a pale white spiritual light, bearing the prophecy of Daniel – the prophecy of doom. Art historian, Shalom Sabar, points out that the position of God's hand has been altered evidently to make the event depicted more dramatic. By showing the enigmatic words actively being composed by it, Rembrandt increases the theatrical element of the painting, "freezing" the highest moment in the drama (Sabar, 2008).

The king whose father Nebuchadnezzar had looted sacred gilded vessels from the sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem, desecrated them by serving wine in them. He and his feasting entourage are overwhelmed, recoiling with fear when watching in amazement and terror, this spectacular, mystical, prophetic revelation comprehending the meaning of neither the words nor the prophecy, since they are trying to read it as usual, horizontally from right to left. The Belshazzar painting, according to Sabar, reveals the intellectual relationships between Rembrandt and Menasseh Ben Israel (Sabar, 2008). The key to this mystery was provided by Reiner Haussherr, who in 1963 found that this very format of the inscription appears in a Latin

book *De termino vitae* by the noted Sephardi rabbi of Amsterdam, Menasseh Ben Israel 1604-1657. The rabbi explained that Belshazzar and his sages could not have read the inscription on the wall attempting to read it from right to left instead of from top to bottom (Sabar, 2008).

Rembrandt, who was familiar with Hebrew letters, knew perfectly well that like Hebrew, Aramaic – the language of the prophecy – was written from right to left. Nevertheless, he chose to write these words vertically. By deviating from the norm, the artist sought to accentuate the Baroque drama and the astonishment of the feasting participants. Rembrandt seems to have scrutinised the subject matter at length, researching the solution to the problem of explaining how the text was indecipherable to all but Daniel. The information about how the words appear is the result of Rembrandt's ties with the Jewish scholar and leader, Menasseh Ben Israel, who related how the writing appeared on the wall as described in the Gemara, where Rabbi Shmuel claimed that the words were written from top to bottom in Daniel's vision. "R's acquaintance with the great Jewish scholar Menashe Ben Israel, whose portrait he etched in 1636, had consequences for his work. When Rembrandt painted Belshazzar, Menashe Ben Israel was preparing a treatise on the subject" (Gerson,1968, p. 230).

In the painting, Belshazaar is dressed in splendour, clad in elaborate oriental robes and an elegant turban. His startled countenance expressing horror, his bewildered frightened gaze fixed on the glowing text, his bulging eye almost popping out of its socket, his crooked nose and his disproportionately small crown all indicate the fulfilment of the prophecy that God has numbered the days of the kingdom and brought it to an end, dividing it up between the Persians and Medes: "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin" (King James Bible, 1611, Dan 5:25). According to history, Babylonian rule had indeed ended and the kingdom passed into the hands of the Persians. Despite the beautiful, Hebrew letters, Rembrandt, erred with the final *nun* (n), which looks more like the letter *zayin* (z). This raises the question of what source of the Hebrew the artist had before him and his degree of mastery of the language. "…the painter had copied the text from a handwritten example, independently, and without the supervision of an advisor" (Knotter, 1999, p. 154).

The double meaning of the word *PARAS* is interesting: firstly, it is the name of a country – Persia but it is also the root letters P/R/S, which indicate "cutting" or "slicing" in Hebrew: God "cut up" the kingdom and gave it to Persia. In the painting, the word *Pharsin* is split in two in the sense of: divided, "cut" according to the syllables. This division might shed light on the underlying meaning of the writing on the wall – the dividing up of Belshazaar's kingdom. By presenting the prophecy as he did, vertically instead of horizontally, Rembrandt joined the biblical commentators and Sages who sought to give shape and form to the mystical writing that the Bible does not specify, and instead of taking liberties and using his imagination, he turned to one of the main Jewish sources – the Gemara, as explained earlier. No other non-Jewish painter in history included as much Hebrew

in his art as he did. "No one equaled his ability to make the Hebrew – real Hebrew – an integral element of the work, central to its message and not merely a decorative or trivial motif" (Nadler, 2003, p. 129).

Conclusion

This article discusses the unusual attitude of Rembrandt van Rijn towards Old Testament stories and the unique artistic representation he gave them, transcribing his faith and piety into painting which differed significantly from any artist who preceded or succeeded him. Rembrandt portrays a certain point in the biblical story from a broad perspective that includes the background of prior events and ones that might conceivably occur in the future. Moreover, he used a variety of means in each work in order to express the high point of the event in the manner in which the Old Testament, the Talmud or the Midrash interpret it, rather than through the prism of the New Testament, which relates to the former as its pre-figuration.

Whereas other artists chose to focus on the "here and now", Rembrandt's is on what is yet to come. They chose to focus on the physical, the material, the earthly, whereas he chose the spiritual, the psychological and the heavenly. Others documented the world; he created his own.

Rembrandt's masterful use of light and shadow is the hallmark of his style as he tells a story or creates a dramatic theatrical effect in his paintings of historical scenes, religious scenes or even of portraits. The contrast between light and dark is compelling and mysterious and with the Rembrandt's sophisticated control of light he can convey motion and emotion.

In his portrait paintings, for example, one half of the face is fully illuminated from the single main light source such as a window, while the other half is in partial shadow. This interaction of shadows and light known as *chiaroscuro* aids in forming deep personal expressions as well as disclosing the inner self of the human subject while unveiling his enigmatic interiority. Chiaroscuro also achieves an impression of dimension, psychological depth and emotional profundity. The light in Rembrandt, while clearly deriving from an external source, paradoxically seems to radiate from the essence of the human subject.

Chiaroscuro, when employed, implies as mentioned before, the level of highlight versus shadow. Images with a high degree of shadow are viewed as mysterious or negative whereas a lower degree of contrast implies openness, love or awareness. When they come together, light and dark can create tension, atmosphere and single out the individual and his-her character in a captivating way.

In Rembrandt's paintings, light and dark are not in conflict, they gently and easily merge with one another, creating a very tranquil mood. This is achieved by the artist's refining the two into finer nuances until the blen-

ding occurs. As a result, light in his paintings appears as a warm glow giving the painting an effect of spiritual stillness, allowing viewers to turn inward and contemplate.

The late First Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael (1865-1935), Rabbi Abraham, Isaac Hacohen Kook, was a brilliant scholar and one of the most profound thinkers of our time. It is important to note that the second commandment distances observant-religious and orthodox members of the Jewish faith from art; consequently, visiting museums is not common among these groups let alone the leaders of the Jewish community – the rabbis. It was extremely exceptional, then, that a rabbi, of such high stature as Rabbi Kook would find himself walking along the corridors of a museum and later sharing his opinion of the artist with the world.

Nonetheless, in an interview given by him to A. Melnikov, in The Jewish Chronicle of London, the late Rabbi Kook spoke of the uniqueness of Rembrandt's art, the divine spark in his works that is so hard to express in words, and of the special quality of his use of light. He explained that God had reserved that unique light only for the righteous when Messiah should come but now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it – and Rembrandt was one of them. Clearly, the light in his pictures is the very one that was originally created by God Almighty. (Melnikov, 1935).

Acknowledgments:

Editor: Nili Laufert
Translation from the Hebrew: Micaela Ziv

References

[1] Bar-Efrat, S. (1987). Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh. *The Burlington Magazine*, *129*(1014), 594-595.
[2] Benesch, O. (1960). *Rembrandt as a draughtsman*. Phaidon Press.
[3] Brueghel, P. (1563). *The tower of Babel* [Painting]. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Holland.
[4] Buettner, J. (2011). Family benediction: The role of Asenath in Rembrandt's Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph. *Hindsight Graduate History Journal*, *5*, 30-41.
[5] Doré, G. (1855). *Jacob wrestling with the Angel.* [Painting]. Private Collection, Engraving.
[6] Doré, G. (c. 1880). *The trial of Abraham's faith.* [Painting]. Private collection, Engraving.
[7] Dorot, R. (2013). *Symbolic allusion, temporal illusion*. Sussex Academic Press.
[8] Durham, J. I. (2004). *The biblical Rembrandt*: *Human painter in a landscape of faith*. Mercer University Press.
[9] Gerson, H. (1968). *Rembrandt's paintings*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
[10] Kayser, R. (1933, July 2). From the Old Testament and the Jews of Holland, Rembrandt drew inspiration and materials of his art. *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 10.
[11] King James Bible. (2020). King James Bible online. https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/ (Original work published in 1611)
[12] Knotter, M. A. (1999). An ingenious device: Rembrandt's use of Hebrew inscriptions. *Studia Rosenthaliana*, *33*(2), 131-159.

[13] Koloff, E. (1920). *Rembrandt*. E. A. Seemann.
[14] Landsberger, F. (1946). *Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible*. The Jewish Publication Society of America.
[15] Liptzin, S. (1985). *Biblical themes in world literature*. Ktav Publishing House.
[16] Melnikov, A. (1935, September 13). Rembrandt and the Divine Light. *The Jewish Chronicle of London*, 21.
[17] Munz, L., & Haak, B. (1984). *Rembrandt*. Harry N. Abrams Inc.
[18] Nadler, S. (2003). *Rembrandt's Jews*. Chicago University Press.
[19] Osterkamp, E. (2003). Manieristische kunst in Goethe's sammlung [Mannerist art in Goethe's collection]. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschite*, *66*(4), 502-523.
[20] Parker, M. (1994). Rembrandt: The artist as theologian. *ARTS*, *7*(1), 26-31.
[21] Pasternak, L. (1923). *Rembrandt*: *yetsirato v-erko La-Yahadut* [Rembrandt: His art and its value for the Jews and Judaism]. Yavne Publications.
[22] Perlove, S., & Silver, L. (2009). *Rembrandt's faith: Church and temple in the Dutch Golden Age*. Penn State University Press.
[23] Poussin, N. (1648). *Rebecca and Eliezer at the well.* [Painting]. Louvre Museum, Paris, France. Oil on canvas.
[24] Rosenberg, J. (1968). *Rembrandt*: *Life and work*. Phaidon Press.
[25] Sabar, S. (2008). Between Calvinists and Jews: Hebrew script in Rembrandt's art. In M. B. Merback (Ed.), *Beyond the yellow badge. Brill's series in Jewish studies* (Vol. 37, pp. 371-404). Brill.
[26] Schama, S. (1987). *The embarrassment of riches*. Vintage Books.
[27] Schama, S. (1999). *Rembrandt's eyes*. Alfred A. Knopf.
[28] Slive, S. (1959). *Rembrandt: Bible paintings.* Beaverbrook Newspapers.
[29] Tumpel, C. (2006). *Rembrandt: Images and metaphors*. Haus Publishing.
[30] Van Rijn, R. (1630). *David plays before Saul* [Painting]. Stadel Museum, Frankfurt, Germany.
[31] Van Rijn, R. (1635). *Belshazzar's feast* [Painting]. National Gallery, London, England.
[32] Van Rijn, R. (1656). *David plays before Saul* [Painting]. Mauritshuis in the Hague, Holland.
[33] Van Rijn, R. (1656). *Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph* [Painting]. Schloss Wilhelmshohe, Kassel, Hesse, Germany.
[34] Van Rijn, R. (1659). *Jacob wrestling with the Angel* [Painting]. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Germany.
[35] Wallace, R. (1968). *The world of Rembrandt 1606-1669*. Time and Life Books.
[36] Zell, M. (2002). *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian image in seventeenth-century Amsterdam*. University of California Press.