

Shelley Perlove and Larry A. Silver. *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age*.

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Perhaps it is a truism to assert that throughout his entire life, Rembrandt never ceased to illustrate scripture, whether it be rare episodes of the Old Testament, well-known stories from Christ's Passion, or half-figure depictions of prophets and prophetesses, saints and the Savior. There is no doubt that Rembrandt's sacred images, as a whole, represent a corpus of uninterrupted, varied, and elaborate reflections on the divine. If one excepts Christian Tümpel's and Julius Held's excellent studies on Rembrandt as a religious painter as well as single essays by other scholars consecrated to specific related topics, no one has thus far dared tackle the vast problematic of Rembrandt's religiosity as an organic ensemble. It is therefore with great enthusiasm and admiration that scholars should greet this study. No one will be able to study any aspect of Rembrandt's religious imagery, from paintings to

drawings and, especially etchings, without consulting Perlove and Silver's volume in advance for suggestions and guidance: the encyclopedic exhaustiveness of the biblical and theological sources perused by the authors with regard to each composition constitutes a motherlode of primary information indispensable for further analysis.

At the core of Perlove and Silver's essay lies the conviction, impossible for anyone not to share, that Rembrandt was well acquainted with the *Statenbijbel*, the official Bible of the Dutch States, and enriched with a panoply of glosses and references orienting the reader through the complex network of parallels binding the Old Covenant and the New Dispensation together. The importance of the *Statenbijbel* and, generally, of religious hermeneutics in the seventeenth-century United Provinces does not need to be proved. The interpretation of actual events in light of Christian teleology on the part of Dutch theologians was far from being univocal, however. As Perlove and Silver defined it, Rembrandt's society was a "religious stew" (17) composed of several Protestant sects and other confessions often pitted against one another — from Mennonites to Remonstrants, from Catholics to Jews — and swept by vehement, potentially devastating debates and movements, including the millenarianism of the 1650s, on which the authors focus. Sensitive to the art market's conditions, Rembrandt, in producing his religious images, could not ignore the radical confessional divisions of his audience and the heated theological polemics and discussions that characterized the historical circumstances of his work's production. Perlove and Silver attempt to establish whether, how, and to what degree Rembrandt's religious images responded to contemporary viewers' expectations in matters of faith and religion.

Predictably, the authors' answers to these questions are varied and richly nuanced. As a general rule, Perlove and Silver convincingly demonstrate Rembrandt's ecumenism: his representations of scripture, though imbued with references to theological issues and conjuring up multifarious parallels between the Old and the New Testament, are crafted to largely conform with any contemporary sect's or confession's outlook on religion. In this regard, I must note that to focus on Rembrandt's diplomatic treatment of sensitive theological debates only partially elucidates his impressive production of sacred narratives and his selection of biblical episodes. To be sure, there is, as Perlove and Silver also believe, a personal component and intrinsic bias in Rembrandt's religious images, but one should also wonder whether his biblical representations, especially the etchings destined for a large audience, were truly valued for their religious discourse and not instead for the originality and artistry of their inventions. In other words, are we sure that Rembrandt's religious etchings must be systematically construed as devotional images? In what measure did these prints target a local market? Were they not also intended for export? Given Rembrandt's success as an etcher in both Italy and France, there could be a risk in exclusively interpreting Rembrandt's religious prints within the purview of the seventeenth-century Dutch audience, especially if one takes into account the diffused mistrust with which many Protestant denominations judged and condemned images.

Another important point in Perlove and Silver's inquiry into Rembrandt's sacred imagery concerns his representation of the Temple and his interpretation of it as a prefiguration or prototype of the Christian Church. As Perlove and Silver point out, Rembrandt must have been familiar with early modern reconstructions of Solomon's Temple, and in evoking some of its architectural elements in his sacred narratives, he brought out specific functions and depicted rituals that closely related, or were perceived as analogous, to those of the contemporary Christian Church. The authors argue that, "Rembrandt's Temple images offer a contrast between the extravagance of religious hierarchy and the humble apostolic community of Christ," and that his implicit criticism of the Temple's ceremonies and riches tends to underscore "the need for individual, internalized religion and isolation from hierarchical institutions" (369). As Perlove and Silver demonstrate, this statement of spiritual independence corresponds to Rembrandt's uniqueness and independence in representing scripture.

In many cases, the authors compellingly unearth cultural and theological implications that are now difficult for viewers to detect. For instance, Ishmael's additional figure in Rembrandt's 1656 etching of *Abraham Entertaining the Angels* is accounted for and commented upon with acuity and pertinence. At times, Perlove and Silver's exegeses, by dwelling on, and emphasizing the importance of, accessories, are not exempt from over-interpretation. A case in point is offered by their reading of Rembrandt's 1633 *Daniel and Cyrus Before the Idol Bel*. If it was Rembrandt's intention to denounce the fraud of Bel's high priests as an example of false idolatry, would it not have been more appropriate for him to depict the moment when Daniel proves the priests' mischief before Cyrus? Why did he instead choose to represent a preliminary episode, when Cyrus tries to convince Daniel of Bel's power? I believe that Perlove and Silver would agree with me if I say that the specific visualization of a narrative, and the greater or lesser relevance of relative actions, elements, and attributes within it, can dramatically modify the meaning of a pictorial composition. At any rate, this is but a minor controversial point in a work that, on account of its erudition and accuracy, will soon become a main reference in Rembrandt studies.

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