

LIVING GODS WILL

Biblical Artists

REMBRANDT



REMBRANDT HARMENSZ. Van RIJN

Born: 1606 – Leiden, Netherlands

Died: 1669 – Amsterdam, Netherlands

Rembrandt Harmensz. Van Rijn

Rembrandt was a painter, draftsman and etcher.

Born in Leiden into a middle-class family in **1606**, **Rembrandt** becomes a pupil of the painter Jacob van Swanenburgh.

In 1624, he studies in Amsterdam in the studio of Pieter Lastman, who will greatly influence his artistic development.

Some say it is Lastman who illustrates to **Rembrandt** Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro – the application of light and darkness to suggest depth.

After returning to Leiden, **Rembrandt** sets up shop with his friend Jan Lievens.

In 1631 he moves to Amsterdam once again. His talent to read faces wins him many portrait assignments.

He marries Saskia van Uylenburgh in 1634; her father, a prominent art dealer, secures him even more work.

In 1639 **Rembrandt** and Saskia move to the Breestraat, a main street bordering on the Jewish neighborhood, where the couple sets up household in the present **Rembrandt House Museum**.

Their new address facilitates **Rembrandt's** study of Jewish faces, making his biblical work even more striking.

Rembrandt created **over 300 works** of art inspired by stories from the Bible. Most of these works are drawings and etchings.

In addition, there are some **60 paintings on Biblical themes**. This essay offers a summary of the style and subject matter of these works.

As in everything he does **Rembrandt's** biblical work reaches far beyond and above everybody else's when it comes to capturing the decisive moment of a particular episode.

Rembrandt paintings initially are rather baroque but after around 1640 they became more austere.

The famous *Night Watch* (1642) may be considered as one of his last truly baroque works. He now concentrates on showing depth of emotions in his figures.

This change may be related to tragic events in his personal life: the early death of three of his children, and of Saskia in 1642.

Around 1647 Hendrickje Stoffels moves in with him. They cannot keep up the cost of living.

The house is heavily mortgaged and **Rembrandt** spends large amounts on financing his vast collection of prints by other artists.

In 1658 he is forced to move to a smaller house.

In his last years **Rembrandt** produces several masterpieces, such as David and Saul (1657) and The Jewish Bride (1665).

Hendrickje dies in 1663, his son Titus in 1668.

Rembrandt dies in **1669** in Amsterdam and is buried in the Westerkerk.

Rembrandt had many students. Among them were:

Ferdinand Bol

Gerard Dou

Carel Fabritius

Govert Flinck

Arent (Aert) de Gelder

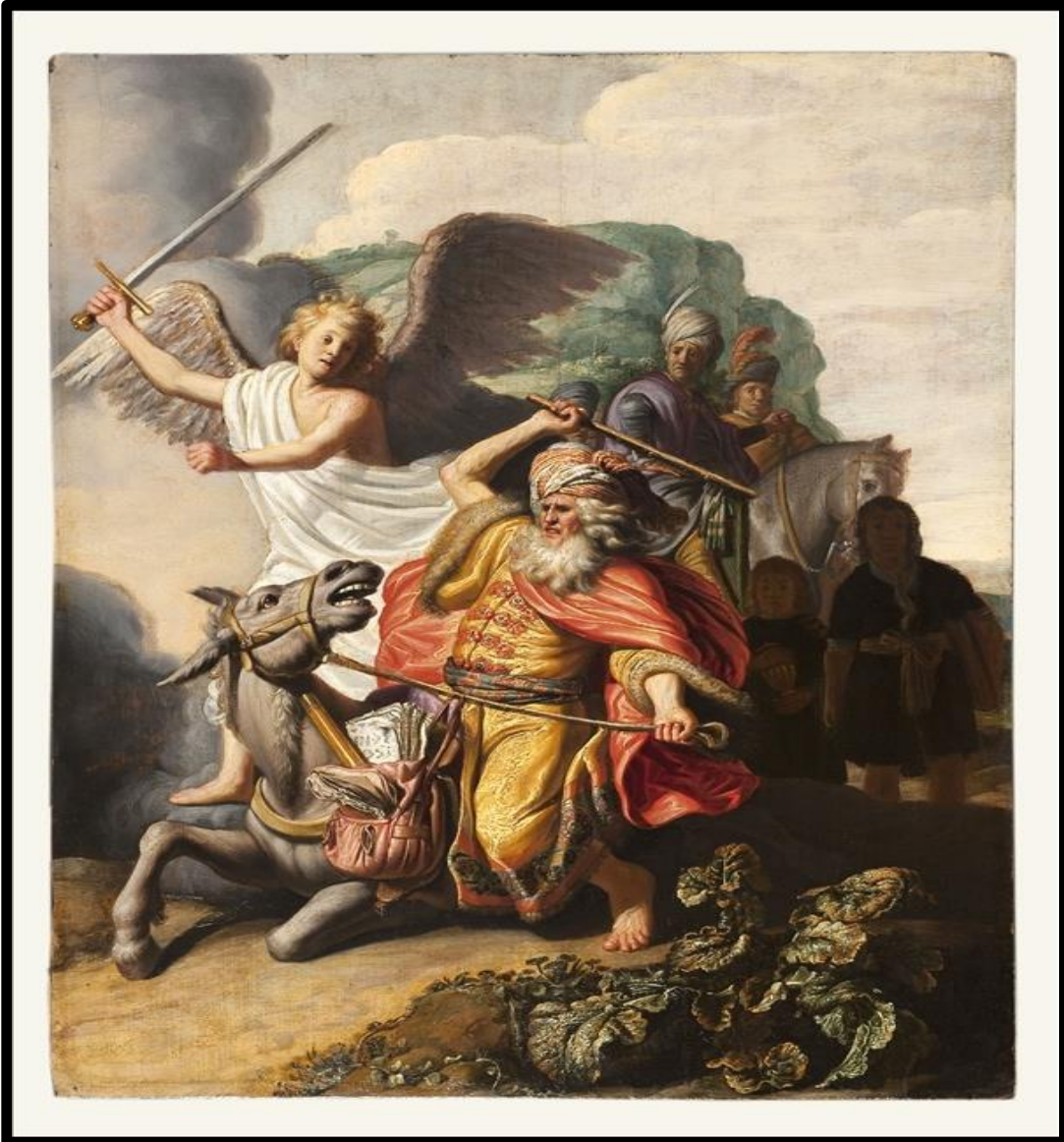
Nicolaes Maes

The Baptism of the Eunuch



oil on panel (63 × 48 cm) — 1626

The black man is the chamberlain of the Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. He is a eunuch, because only castrated men were allowed in the queen's inner circle. After a visit to Jerusalem he meets the apostle Philip. The chamberlain asks him to explain a verse from Isaiah he had just read (**53:7**) to him. Philip explains the verse and then joins him on his trip. The apostle starts preaching Jesus' gospel to the chamberlain. Later on, when they reach a river, the chamberlain asks Philip to Baptize him. He undergoes the baptism in ecstasy, with his hand on his chest and his eyes directed to heaven.

The Prophet Balaam and the Donkey**oil on panel (63 × 47 cm) — 1626**

One of the earliest works by the young Rembrandt, who in 1626 had just set up shop for himself. This work is probably derivative of a painting by his master Pieter Lastman, be it in a truly new composition. Balaam was a heathen prophet summoned by the Moabitean King Balak to curse Israel. On his way to Balak his she-ass refuses to walk three times because an angel blocks the road. Balaam does not see the angel and strikes the she-ass. After a third thrashing the god of the Hebrews speaks through the she-ass: What have I done to you? At which Balaam repents.

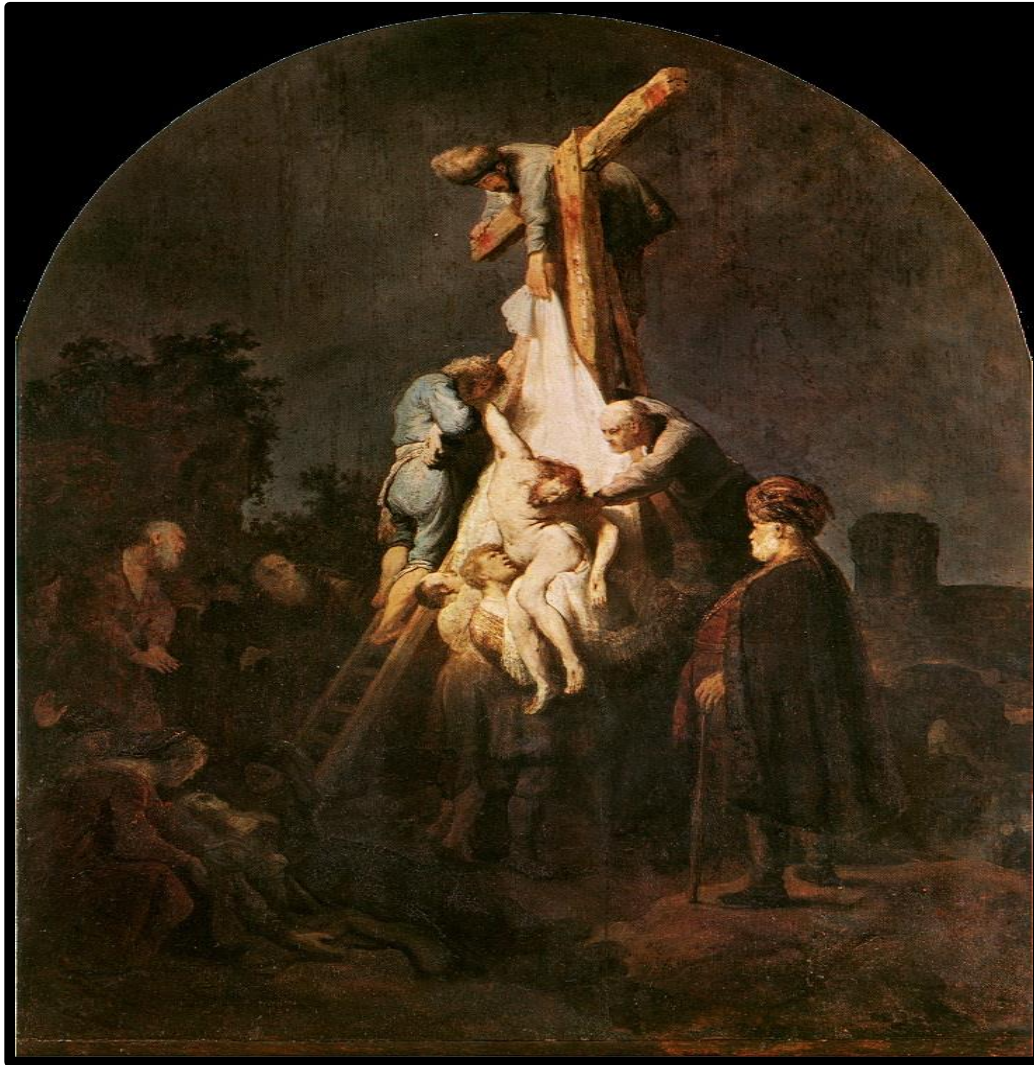
Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem

oil on panel (58 × 46 cm) – 1630

Despite the warnings in his prophecies, Jeremiah has to witness the fall of his beloved Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar's troops set the city on fire. In the distance to the left Zedekiah can be seen, holding his fists before his eyes. Zedekiah was the last king of Judah and was made blind by the soldiers.

Jeremiah sees it all in sorrow. His figure is lighted beautifully, with his elbow leaning on a book with the side text Bibel.

Rembrandt made this painting while in Leiden, before moving to Amsterdam in 1631. He then often used the blunt end of his brush to cut and carve in the paint.

The Descent from the Cross

oil on panel (90 × 65 cm) — c. 1632 – 1633

Joseph of Arimathea is helping Jesus down from the cross. The man in the blue suit assisting him, is a self-portrait.

The man watching the action is Nicodemus, a person mentioned only in the Gospel of John. To the left, in the dark, Mary has fainted.

There is some similarity with the Descent from the Cross by PP Rubens, but Rembrandt's work is more serene than the dramatic tableau by Rubens.

Saint Paul at his Desk



oil on canvas (135 × 111 cm) — c. 1633

Somewhat tired, an old man sits at his desk.

The sword against the wall tells us this must be St. Paul.

The former persecutor of Christians is often depicted with that attribute.

The painting is signed in the lower left corner with "**Rembrandt 163**".

Experts think it must be made around 1633.

The Angel Prevents the Sacrifice of Isaac



oil on canvas (193 x 133 cm) – 1635

At the very last moment, an angel stops Abraham from killing his own son, Isaac. Pretending they set out to slaughter a lamb, Abraham actually intended to sacrifice Isaac to his god.

This work is linked to **Genesis 22:10**

Belshazzar's Feast

oil on canvas (168 x 209 cm) – ca. 1635/39

The Chaldean ruler Belshazzar organizes a feast and uses the silverware his ancestor Nebuchadnezzar stole from the temple in Jerusalem. During the feast a hand appears that writes on the wall.

Belshazzar consults his experts to discover the meaning of the writing, but to no avail. Only Daniel can read it – according to Rembrandt and a rabbi he consulted because the words were written vertically.

This writing is indeed *the writing on the wall* – the very next day the sacrilegious king is struck dead.

Jacob Blessing the Children of Joseph

oil on canvas (175 × 210 cm) – 1656

When Joseph hears that his father Jacob is dying, he takes his sons Manasseh and Ephraim to see him. He wants Jacob to bless his sons. The blind old man is willing to do so, but much to Joseph's surprise, he puts his right hand on Ephraim's head. Tradition had it that the eldest is to be blessed with the right hand, and Ephraim is the younger.

As Joseph objects, Jacob says about Ephraim "his seed shall become a multitude of nations". Jacob thus must have known that the tribe of Ephraim would become larger than the tribe of Manasseh.

Note the presence of Asenath, mother of the children.

Moses Smashing the Tablets of the Law

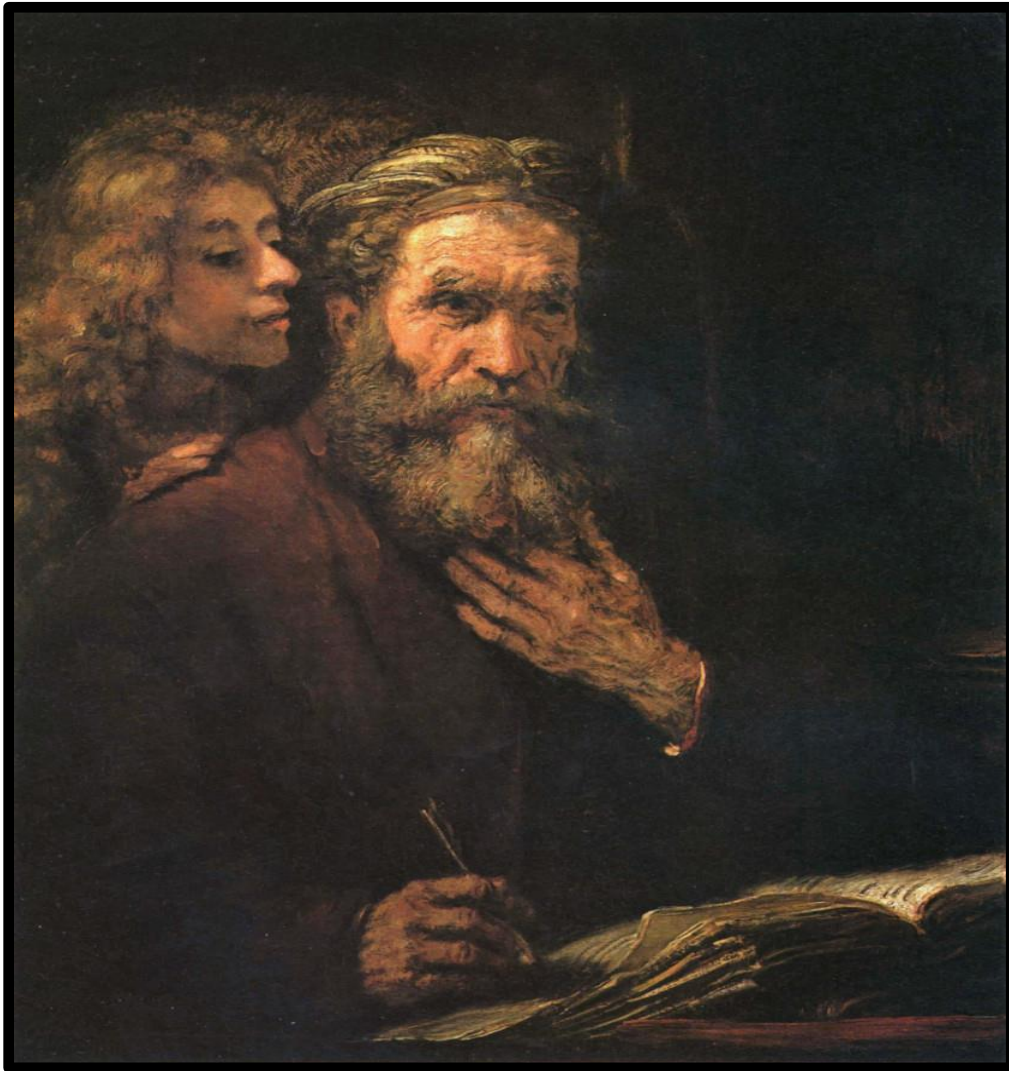
oil on canvas (167 × 135 cm) – 1659

Moses had received tablets with the Ten Commandments from God, which he could use to teach the rules to his people.

But while he was away, the people again neglected God's word.

When Moses saw the people dancing around a golden calf, he smashed the tablets out of frustration.

This work is linked to **Exodus 32:19**

Saint Matthew and the Angel

oil on canvas (96 × 81 cm) — 1661

St Matthew is often depicted with an angel-like boy.

Contrary to the other evangelists his attribute is not an animal but a human being. That is because his gospel begins with a list of fathers and sons, Jesus' family tree.

Rembrandt has the boy whisper something in Matthew's ear.

Perhaps the apostle was short of inspiration while writing his gospel. The boy resembles Rembrandt's son Titus.