

FAMILY BENEDICTION: THE ROLE OF ASENATH IN REMBRANDT'S *JACOB BLESSING*

THE SONS OF JOSEPH

By

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Rembrandt is the master of visual eavesdropping. In his 1665 painting of *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, which hangs in Germany's Kassel museum, the enthralled spectator steals a surreptitious glimpse of a private family gathering. The curtains are drawn back just in time for the viewer to witness a tender benediction of one generation upon another in a hushed, holy moment of familial love. The painting's shallow depth and low vantage point heightens the sense of intrusion upon privileged space; indeed the observer almost feels as though he is peeking out from beneath the lush vermilion coverlet at the end of the bedposts. There is no doubt that the onlooker is witnessing a momentous family drama.

The scene that Rembrandt chose to depict came from the life of one of his favorite biblical characters, Jacob. In the book of Genesis, Jacob had come to the end of his long life of 147 years. His beloved son Joseph hurried to his deathbed requesting his father's benediction for his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. As the story unfolds, the patriarch reaches out to the younger son with his right hand and the older son with his left hand, deliberately reversing the traditional order in which the elders blessed the first- and second-born children. Joseph attempts to correct his father, but Jacob asserts his wish to reverse the order of the blessing, saying that while the firstborn "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.”¹

Jacob’s deathbed blessing of Manasseh and Ephraim has a long typological history in art. Earlier works of the same theme emphasize the blessing reversal by showing Jacob crossing his hands to bless his grandchildren, the arm position pointedly representing the future cross of Christ’s sacrifice.² Other time-honored representations of the story highlight Joseph’s displeasure at the reversed blessing and his attempt to force his father’s hand.³ In the Kassel painting, however, Rembrandt eliminates both the patently christological crossing of the arms and Joseph’s incensed response to the inverted blessing, instead portraying him as an indulgent, caring son, full of filial understanding toward his father’s last wishes. The most important departure from customary representations of this theme, and indeed from the biblical narrative itself, occurs in Rembrandt’s highly unusual addition of Joseph’s wife, Asenath.⁴

Critics have long debated Rembrandt’s intent in his abandonment of the traditional artistic and biblical motifs in the blessing story.⁵ The blessing theme in art from the Medieval to the Baroque Ages was understood to symbolize the relationship between

¹ Genesis 48:19.

² Bob Haak, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Work, His Time* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1969), 283.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt Paintings* (Amsterdam: Reynal, 1968), 116.

⁵ Many Rembrandt specialists have weighed in on Rembrandt’s divergence from tradition and even possibly scripture in his abandonment of traditional motifs in the blessing story. See Christian and Astrid Trumpel, *Rembrandt, Images and Metaphors* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006), Shimon Bar-Efrat, “Some Remarks on Rembrandt’s ‘Jacob Blessing Ephraim and Manasseh’” *The Burlington Magazine* 129, no. 1014 (September 1987), Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt, Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

Christianity and Judaism, whereby it was not the Jews as the first born of God who received the true blessing but rather the younger children of God, the Christians. This was a typological interpretation of the New Covenant replacing the Old.⁶ Despite the fact that Rembrandt did not depict the cross in Jacob's arm position, art historians such as Shimon Bar-Efrat believe that it is inarguable that Rembrandt intended to present Ephraim as the archetype of Christianity with his radiantly angelic features, devoutly crossed hands and the surrounding light creating a halo over his bowed blond head.⁷ The elder son, Manasseh, as the archetype of the Jewish faith, is contrasted with a dark complexion and dark hair. The preference of Ephraim over Manasseh indicated the superiority of Christianity over Judaism.⁸

Several art historians have weighed in further on Rembrandt's possible theological intent in his depiction of the blessing story: some believe that Rembrandt held a *philosemitic* philosophy, which imputed high regard to Jewish people and anticipated an eventual joining of Jews and Christians in a shared inheritance.⁹ Others think that he subscribed to the philosophy of *irenicism*, which offered an image of a united Christianity based on the conversion of all Jewish people before the impending end times,¹⁰ while other scholars argue that he held an *ecumenical* view of a monotheistic religion believing that every church,

⁶ Tumpel, 235.

⁷ Bar-Efrat, 594.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zell, 175.

¹⁰ Perlove and Silver, 107.

including Judaism, possessed a fragment of the revealed truth.¹¹ Each of these theories is compelling and fascinating, but none explains the unusual addition of Joseph's wife Asenath to the masterpiece. Earlier depictions of the benediction scene depict the conferring of blessing to the succeeding generations as a male-dominated tradition. Perhaps more importantly, there is no mention in the Bible of Asenath's presence at the blessing. Who is this character, and why does she figure so prominently in Rembrandt's composition?

Although there is no biblical reference to Asenath's attendance at Jacob's deathbed, she is briefly mentioned by name in the Bible as Joseph's wife and Ephraim and Manasseh's mother.¹² There are, moreover, many legends about this woman in both Jewish and Christian extra-biblical texts, folklore, and literature.¹³ Asenath was the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and was a virgin of such great beauty that she attracted the attention of many prominent Egyptian suitors. She forswore all men, however, and rejected her father's idea that she marry Joseph, the Pharaoh's viceroy, that is until she spotted him from her tower of seclusion. Joseph was astonishingly handsome and Asenath fell in love with him at proverbial "first sight." Joseph spied Asenath at her window as well and noting her extraordinary beauty, expressed his desire to meet her (as a "brother," for she was a pagan). Lamenting her hasty rebuff of her father's proposal, she ran down to meet him, offering him a kiss. Joseph refused her kiss, for she was an idol worshipper. Noting that his rejection visibly wounded Asenath's spirit, Joseph pitied her and asked God to bless her. Asenath

¹¹ Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 609.

¹² Genesis 41:50, 42:45, and 46:20.

¹³ Sol Liptzin, *Biblical Themes in World Literature* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1985), 62-63. The many folkloric and literary sources referencing Asenath include the apocryphal *Testament of Joseph*, the historian Josephus, Talmudic sages, early church fathers, Arabian and Persian poets, medieval chroniclers, Renaissance painters and playwrights, baroque novelists, modern lyricists, and contemporary writers and musical composers.

hastened to her chamber, replaced her magnificent robes with sackcloth and ashes, destroyed her idols, and repented, fasting for seven days. As a result of her penitent humility, God sent the Archangel Michael to inform her that she will be given in marriage to Joseph. The Archangel also appeared to Joseph with the same message. Joseph returned to Asenath, kissed her three times, conferring upon her blessings of life, wisdom and truth, and rushed to obtain consent from the Pharaoh to marry her. Pharaoh gave them a fantastic wedding, a weeklong fête which was celebrated throughout all of Egypt.¹⁴ And they lived happily ever after.

It is no wonder that Rembrandt would afford such a woman an important place in the composition of his painting. As the beloved wife of Joseph, she represented the seventeenth-century Dutch ethos of a love-based partnership in marriage. In the seventeenth-century Netherlands, the wife was increasingly seen as more of a colleague to the husband in affairs of marriage and family.¹⁵ The Dutch Republic in Rembrandt's day was also at the vanguard of the concept of the overriding import of love as a basis for marriage, as exemplified in seventeenth-century Dutch texts and paintings.¹⁶ The ideal of romantic love was highly fashionable and a seemingly obsessive topic of conversation, literature, songs and art.¹⁷ Amsterdam preacher Petrus Wittewrongel specifically asserted that a major reason for the institution of marriage was romantic companionship. In 1665, he

¹⁴ Lipzin, 65-66, and Edgar W. Smith, Jr., *Joseph and Asenath and Early Christian Literature; A Contribution to the Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti* (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate College, 1974), 1-2.

¹⁵ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 424-425.

¹⁶ Mariet Westerman, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic 1585-1718* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 135.

¹⁷ Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 36.

wrote that in the obligation of marriage, man and wife “must be tied to one another through a very dear and affectionate marriage-love... Through the kindling of love in all friendship and dearness, they should warm each other’s hearts with conjugal feeling and love.”¹⁸

Through his relationships with his wife, Saskia, and his long time companion, Hendrikje Stoffels, Rembrandt must have experienced the joy and contentment that comes from the consciousness of the support of a loving helpmate. In his painting, *The Jewish Bride*, he reveals a conjugal tenderness, which might be neither understood nor portrayed with such poignancy unless it has been experienced. Historian Simon Schama relates that the seventeenth-century Dutch expected their wives to be their husband’s “therapists” in helping them deal with the trials of life.¹⁹ In addition to providing emotional support in marriage, the truly modern seventeenth-century Dutch wife also served as an assistant to her husband in affairs involving his business or professional life.²⁰ Truly, the early modern Dutch marriage was innovative in its expression of a love-based companionable partnership. Therefore, when an important family event occurred such as the deathbed farewell of the patriarch, the wife in her role as her husband’s emotional and spiritual ally would naturally be present. Asenath represents the devoted, compassionate, *involved* wife as seen in the tender and solemn expression with which she gazes upon the unfolding events.

With the increasing significance of the wife’s position in the institution of marriage in seventeenth-century Dutch culture, there was an ensuing elevation of the value of one of her primary roles: motherhood. Early modern Dutch society redefined the construct of the

¹⁸ Schama, *Embarrassment*, 421.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 400.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 377-379, 480.

family. In other European cultures, the family consisted of multiple co-resident generations, including parents, grandparents, siblings and other relatives of the married couple. The Dutch home became increasingly privatized and bore a close resemblance to a contemporary nuclear family structure.²¹ The Dutch family was a metaphor for the greater Dutch community and a properly run household was viewed by aristocrats and burghers as a microcosm of the independent spirit, feisty optimism and principled fortitude of the “divinely ordained” Dutch commonwealth.²² The home was the all-important determinant of moral fate, both for individuals and society. It was the mother’s duty, even more than the father’s, to protect the purity of the household and instill within the children the family’s religious and ethical beliefs.²³ In contrast to other European cultures at the time, Dutch families valued their children, not just as miniature adults, but cherished them in their unique development.²⁴ Dutch parents increasingly invested much time, money and love in their children.²⁵ The multitude of artistic renderings of children attests to their significance in the Dutch society. The blessing scene represented in Rembrandt’s Kassel painting reveals the loving affection of Dutch parents toward their children in the proud and tender gaze of both Joseph and Asenath toward Ephraim and Manasseh. The inclusion of Asenath in the family drama underscores the importance of the mother in Dutch society, especially in her vital role

²¹ Jan De Vries and Ad Van Der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), 163.

²² Schama, *Embarassment*, 386 and Westerman, 118. Both Schama and Westerman write extensively about the visual image of the Dutch family as a metaphor for the ideals of the young Dutch Republic.

²³ Schama, *Embarassment*, 393.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 485-486.

²⁵ Rudolf Dekker, *Childhood, Memory and Autobiography in Holland, From the Golden Age to Romanticism* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 8.

as instructor and transmitter of the family's values to the offspring. This has special significance in Rembrandt's blessing scene in which the mother, as arbiter of the family's values, participates with complicity in the benediction toward her children.

Asenath represents the elevated value placed on love-based marriage and motherhood, and she also bears the position of daughter-in-law to Jacob. The role of the in-law in any society is fraught with complexity and the inclusion of Asenath in the Kassel canvas brings a richly nuanced dimension to the narrative. Jewish legend reveals more details than the Bible of the events surrounding Jacob's deathbed blessing. At the end of Jacob's long life, he developed blindness and Asenath became his caretaker. She communicated to her husband her fear that his father was nearing death. Joseph dearly wished for his sons to receive their grandfather's benediction, and brought Ephraim and Manasseh to Jacob's bedside. Jacob, however, initially resisted the blessing with its implications of gifting separate tribes of Israel to each of the grandsons, for he was concerned with their upbringing in the pagan country of Egypt. Joseph assured his father of Asenath's sincere conversion to Judaism and emphasized that both he and Asenath raised their children to embrace the tenets of their grandfather's faith. He petitioned, "I pray thee father, bless my sons if only for the sake of this pious woman."²⁶ The spirit of the Lord descended upon Jacob and he commenced with the blessing.²⁷ Jacob's blessing revealed his confidence in the competent mothering of Asenath. The painting portrays the ancient and venerable blind man gathering all his strength with a glow from within, to impart to his

²⁶ Louis Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Volume II (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1910) 136.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

grandsons the legacy of his faith and heritage. A reference to the past is revealed in the fur shawl which surrounds him. For this is not the first time a reversal of blessing has occurred. Jacob was also a younger son and at the occasion of *his* father's gifting of birthright to his elder brother, Esau, he engaged in a fraud devised by his mother, Rebecca. This scheme enabled Jacob to receive the blessing instead of the rightful recipient, Esau. Rebecca and Jacob accomplished this deception by tricking his father, who was also blind, into believing he was the hairier brother, Esau, by the wearing of a fur cloak similar to the fur garment surrounding the old Jacob, now at his deathbed.²⁸ Asenath's presence at the current scene of benediction is a symbol of, as Simon Schama puts it, "the artless innocent mother, in implied contrast to Rebecca, the artful and culpable thief of Esau's benediction."²⁹ Through Asenath, in her role as daughter-in-law to the patriarch, Jacob has the chance to redress his former sins against his father and brother and confer blessing to *both* of his grandsons, ending the long history of deception and rivalry. Asenath represents not only the caring wife, mother and daughter-in-law, but also the penitent convert to Judaism and the reconciler of generational strife.

The elegant, stately beauty of the Asenath in Rembrandt's Kassel canvas seems to embody the qualities of the woman represented in Jewish legends. She is described as being endowed with a lively personality, the tall strength of Sarah, the charm of Rebecca and the beauty of Rachel.³⁰ Rembrandt dressed Asenath in the fanciful garments and headgear thought by the seventeenth-century Dutch to be worn by elegant women of Cairo, that is, in

²⁸ Genesis 27.

²⁹ Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 607.

³⁰ Lipzin, 63.

fitting attire for the Egyptian wife of Joseph.³¹ The question remains as to how Rembrandt would have learned the stories about Asenath when she only mentioned very minimally in the Bible. Rembrandt may have encountered Asenath's tales while attending the theater in Amsterdam or reading popular literature, for the love story of Joseph and Asenath was quite in vogue in literature and plays published throughout Europe, including the Dutch Republic.³² He may have also learned of the Jewish legends of Asenath through his professional relationship and friendship with Amsterdam Rabbi, Menasseh ben Israel.³³

Even if Rembrandt only knew the minimal biblical details surrounding Joseph's wife, his inclusion of Asenath in the Kassel painting affects the reading of the narrative in a profound way. Scholars may speculate upon the theological or intellectual premises that Rembrandt brought to the painting, but the fact remains that at the heart, this is a depiction of a precious family moment. As a rule, Rembrandt did not paint family portraits, except in the years 1665 and 1666 when he created his only known family portrait, *The Family Group*, and the Kassel canvas depicting Joseph's family.³⁴ These were difficult years in Rembrandt's life. He underwent bankruptcy and was in the process of losing most of his material possessions.³⁵ He had already sustained so many losses, among them the deaths of his wife Saskia and their first three children. The tranquility exhibited in the Kassel painting is

³¹ Marieke De Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy, Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 262-266. De Winkel describes sixteenth century travel accounts that relate a high head-dress with a white veil that was worn by the women of Cairo. She believes what was thought of as Egyptian garb in the seventeenth century was actually a fourteenth century fashion, probably of European origin, but portrayed in medals found in Egypt.

³² Lipzin, 63-64.

³³ Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 607.

³⁴ Anat Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work* (Delft: Eburon, 2003), 94.

³⁵ Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 606,610.

remarkable during this turbulent time in Rembrandt's life. Nevertheless, it is at just such times, when events have spun out of control that one realizes the importance of relationships in life, and gratitude and contentment inexplicably emerge. Serenity seems to shine from *Jacob Blessing the Children of Joseph* as Rembrandt depicted the family as a source of contentment and hope.

Rembrandt gave great importance to the emotional impact which his paintings elicit in the viewer. He subordinated the narrative to the poignant depiction of the human condition and was inclined to portray the family as a unit in historical scenes or to show the husband and wife together even if the written source did not mention them.³⁶ *Joseph Blessing the Sons of Jacob* may well detail christological symbolism or promote a conversionist agenda, but to relate its meaning to only his intellectual or theological intent is to miss the profound human breadth of this magnificent work. Rembrandt understood the sacred significance of the Biblical act of blessing: the one who blesses holds the role as God's instrument, giving pronouncements with the breathtaking import of divine message.³⁷ And there is probably no event which softens the heart and permits the expression of all-embracing familial love than a gathering of family at the deathbed of the patriarch. The presence of Asenath adds poignancy and richness to this tender drama. As a mother, she represents the instructor and transmitter of values to the children. As a wife, she provides emotional sustenance to her husband in a distressing time. As a bridge of healing between father and son, she is a supporter of resolution and reconciliation in the final leave-taking moment when the

³⁶ Trumpel, 236.

³⁷ Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work* (London: Phadon, 1964), 224.

grandfather sends forth his last shining blessing of goodness, hope and love to his grandchildren, who would become “a multitude of nations.”



Rembrandt, *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, 1665.³⁸

³⁸ Image printed with permission from Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, located in Kassel, Germany.