

# Die Bibel in der Kunst / Bible in the Arts

Online-Zeitschrift 2, 2018

## Rembrandt and the Iconography of David and Jonathan

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# Rembrandt and the Iconography of David and Jonathan

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## Abstract

Rembrandts Gemälde „David und Jonatan“ stellt dar, wie sich die beiden Freunde trennen. Es hebt sich deutlich von den relativ wenigen älteren Darstellungen der Szene ab, die die Freundschaft der beiden Protagonisten darstellen. Das Gesicht Jonatans ist ein Selbstportrait Rembrandts, der das Gemälde 1642 unmittelbar nach dem Tod seiner Frau in eben diesem Jahr gemalt hat. Der Trennungsschmerz von David und Jonatan wird für ihn zum Sinnbild von Trennungsschmerzen. Anachronistisch zeigt Rembrandt im Hintergrund den Jerusalemer Tempel, der gegenüber diesem Schmerz hier als Zeichen der Hoffnung erscheint.

“I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” What is the meaning of this painful exclamation in 2Sam 1:26? How can David cry over his friend Jonathan? Prolific are the uncomfortable interpretations to avoid saying what everyone secretly thinks: could David be in love with Jonathan as if he were a woman? Even though the history of reception did not promote this interpretation until the 19th century,<sup>1</sup> the text has always aroused a certain unease throughout history. And today the proclamations that “love does not mean lovers”<sup>2</sup> or that this is a sort of poetic license are a little too forceful to fool the people. In the late 1970s, the text became the most notorious episode of the Old Testament, when Tom Horner and chiefly the famous John Boswell<sup>3</sup> appropriated it and eventually confiscated it. Books and articles multiplied and made this pericope the obligatory passage of any reflection on King David or on sexuality in the Bible, and more generally, in religions.<sup>4</sup>

From this modern point of view, one would expect many representations of the two friends. David has been one of the artists’ favorite subjects since the earliest times, probably because he prefigures the messianic nature of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Burnet / Courtray, David et Jonathan.

<sup>2</sup> Cartledge, 1&2 Samuel, 358.

<sup>3</sup> Boswell, Same-sex; Horner, Jonathan.

<sup>4</sup> Zehnder, Observations.

The representations of him are very early: they date back to the 3rd (Catacomb of Calixtus) and 4th centuries (on the very damaged wooden doors of Sant' Ambrogio, Milan).<sup>5</sup> However such representations are very few. Also medieval illuminations—usually very widespread—are rare, and paintings are even more exceptional.<sup>6</sup> *The Farewell of David and Jonathan* of Rembrandt in the Hermitage Museum is therefore an exception. This painting, which took long to be identified, is a masterly interpretation of the episode, both by its artistic qualities and Rembrandt's understanding of the passage.

## 1. The Enigma of Rembrandt's Painting



Fig. 1: Rembrandt van Rijn, *David's Farewell to Jonathan* (oil on panel, 61x73 cm, 1642 AD).

<sup>5</sup> Murray / Murray, *Christian Art*, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Pyper, *Love*.

Rembrandt's painting *David's Farewell to Jonathan* (Fig. 1) has always occupied a unique place in the artist's work; it breaks so much with the canons of representation of the episode that experts have long hesitated to attribute its proper subject.

This large-format painting was certainly of great value to the painter himself since he did not want to sell it. Only the financial difficulties forced him to sell it in March 1659 to Lodowijck van Ludick,<sup>7</sup> a merchant in Amsterdam, who probably sold it to Herman Becker, since its trace can be found in Herman Becker's post-mortem inventory of property, drawn up on 19 October 1678. It then moved on to the collection of L. van der Heem (1713) and Jan van Beuningen (1716). It was then bought for a small fortune—80 guilders—by Osip Solovyëv, acting on behalf of Czar Peter the Great, on 13 May 1716. Sent to St. Petersburg on 19 June, it found its place in the Palais Montplaisir. He was not transferred to the Hermitage until 1882.

Illuminated by an almost divine light, David, seen from behind, throws himself into Jonathan's arms. He wears a sumptuous garment of rich golden colors and wears a magnificent sword held by a harness on his shoulder. The handle and the keeper look like fine gold, while the sheath is made of gold and a kind of green velvet. Jonathan wears an astonishing turban with egret. He is dressed in an olive-colored robe with golden fringes and a sumptuous coat enhanced with gold thread. At the feet of the two partners lies a quiver of arrows which recalls the code intended to warn David of Saul's anger and also a sort of messenger bag, alluding to the next departure of the young shepherd. On the left, a cut out shape is the Ezel rock where David told Jonathan to wait for him. At the back stretches a city that could be Jerusalem: houses and a curious circular building surmounted by a dome. Behind them, above scarcely lit bushes, rises a wall built of large stone blocks and partly covered by foliage—possibly David's hiding place—with what appears to be drapery hanging in front of it at the extreme top. The empty space between the men in the foreground and the city in the background is extremely effective. The merging of the two men reduces the composition to its simplest: a large, strongly form placed before an empty space. This curious staging led the Rembrandt Project members to dis-attribute the work to the Rembrandt in 1989 (and attribute it to his pupil Ferdinand Bol),<sup>8</sup> before re-attributing it in 2011 and 2015.<sup>9</sup> Once again, the work is so original that it still baffles Rembrandt's best specialists.

Looking at this painting, the spectator is struck at first by the almost paternal gentleness with which Jonathan, portrayed as an elderly man, holds the young David in his arms and the confidence that the latter has in him, letting his head rest on his chest. Just as Rembrandt has irrevocably changed the way we see

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<sup>7</sup> Crenshaw, *Bankruptcy*, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Bruyn / Haak / Levie / Van Thiel / Van de Wetering, *Corpus III*, 533–541.

<sup>9</sup> Van de Wetering, *Corpus V*, 221; Van de Wetering, *Corpus VI*, 577.

Saul by depicting the old king crying as he listens to David's lyre,<sup>10</sup> so has he overturned the opinion of the young shepherd. Through this posture, he emphasizes the emotional capacities and humanity of the future king of Israel.<sup>11</sup> He is capable of tenderness and friendship, and even of sadness at the thought of leaving his friend. Far from the heroic representations, he paints flesh and blood beings, expressing the human condition,<sup>12</sup> in an astonishing closeness to those who contemplate them.

The old inventories describe the image as a *Return of the Prodigal Son* or a *Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau* (Gen. 33:4). In 1893, Andrei Somov proposed a new title which lasted a long time: *The Reconciliation between David and Absalom after the Killing of his Brother Amnon*.<sup>13</sup>

"Absalom answered Joab, 'Look, I sent word to you: Come here, that I may send you to the king with the question, 'Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still.' Now let me go into the king's presence; if there is guilt in me, let him kill me!' Then Joab went to the king and told him; and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom." (2Sam 14:32–33)

This description was rejected in 1925 by Graf von Baudissin,<sup>14</sup> who identified the scene as the departure of David and Jonathan: the bow and arrows lying on the ground were used by Jonathan to warn David and the rock, on the left, served as a meeting place and was named Ezel by the Vulgate. Unfortunately, Baudissin failed to explain David's royal appearance. It was only in 1957 that Vladimir Levinson-Lessing<sup>15</sup> finally solved the matter by showing that a few verses before this meeting, Jonathan had given David his garments.

"When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt." (1Sam 18:1–4)

Since 1957, this interpretation has prevailed. It was reinforced by Christian Tümpel, who supported it with the study of earlier sketches and also remarking that Rembrandt himself designated this painting as a "David and Jonathan" in a note he wrote in 1659 to his creditor, the merchant Lodewijk van Ludick, in order to repay him.<sup>16</sup> These difficulties of identification demonstrate the innovation

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<sup>10</sup> Epstein, *Seeing Saul*, 334.

<sup>11</sup> Perlove / Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 118.

<sup>12</sup> White, *Rembrandt*, 148.

<sup>13</sup> Somov, *Ermitage*.

<sup>14</sup> Graf von Baudissin, *Anmerkungen*.

<sup>15</sup> Levinson-Lessing, *École*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Haverkamp-Begemann, *Present State*; Tümpel, *Studien*.

inherent in Rembrandt's iconographic choice, which deliberately breaks with all the previous canons.

## 2. A Rare Episode in the History of Painting

While the story of David and Jonathan contains some very romantic features, it is surprising to note that it has not aroused the interest of artists. The various episodes have been rarely depicted, and often in a stereotypical way. From the medieval illuminators onwards, artists have always picked the same episode: the last meeting of David and Jonathan.

"David rose from beside the stone heap and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more. Then Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.'" He got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city." (1Sam 20:41–42)

This encounter can be found in art both in the East and the West. For example, in a Byzantine manuscript of the Book of Samuel (*Liber Regum I*) from the 11th or 12th century preserved in the Vatican Library, the Codex Vat. Gr. 333 (Fig. 2), we find the characteristic elements of the iconography of the two companions.<sup>17</sup> Two successive episodes are represented in the same miniature. On the left, Jonathan, with a bow in his hand, prepares to shoot the arrow that will inform David about Saul's disposition, while the small servant rushes to seek it. On the right David and Jonathan, both represented as youths, embrace each other before bidding farewell.



Fig. 2: Codex Vaticanus, Gr. 333, f°28r. (11th/12th century).

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, Cod. Vat. Gr. 463.

An identical compositional arrangement is found in the West, for instance in the Pamplona Bible, an illustrated text of the Bible, illuminated in 1197 for Sancha VII of Navarre where David and Jonathan hold each other (Fig. 3).

The most significant depictions of the same embrace can be found in the manuscripts of *La Somme le Roi*, a text dating from the late 13th century. A Dominican friar, Brother Laurent, designed it to help prepare penitents for confession and was dedicated to King of France Philip III the Bold, to whom he was confessor. The six parts of this manual deal with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Art of Dying, the Father and the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. In this last section, Laurent opposes gifts and sins. He takes into consideration the virtue of friendship which he opposes to the sin of hatred. To illustrate friendship, he takes the example of David and Jonathan, to illustrate hate, the one of Saul and David. In the oldest copy in Paris (Fig. 4), David and Jonathan kiss each other between two stylized trees (other copy: London, British Library, Ms. Add. 28, 182, f°6v; Cambridge, King's College Ms 3 I, f°20, and several manuscripts in Bibliothèque nationale de France). Oddly enough, it is David, who is not the king's son, who wears a crown, while Jonathan goes bare-headed: Perhaps it is an allusion to the anointing that the young shepherd has just received from Samuel, or an echo to the word of Jonathan in 1Sam 23:17: "you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you." Like the previous image, the embrace is very conventional and seems like the accolade of the suzerain to his vassal.



Fig. 3: Pamplona Bible (1197 AD).



Fig.4: Frère Laurent, *La Somme le Roi*, manuscript from Lorraine illuminated by Perinz de Falons cleric (1294 AD).

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Fig. 5: Frère Laurent, *La Somme le Roi*, manuscript illuminated by Laurent le Petit for Jeanne d'Eu (1311 AD).

ing it by the tip. Jonathan escorts him with the proud and tender air of an older brother admiring his younger brother.<sup>18</sup> He carries an unrealistic arrow in his left hand, as tall as himself. In the background spreads a landscape with a fortified stronghold to the left and a city resembling those of Veneto to the right, as a stream widens to form a *lagoon*. Giorgione had already represented himself as a victorious David. His famous painting is a testimony to the popularity of the Old Testament figures in Ve-

The same representation in a later manuscript from the Bibliothèque nationale de France one can see in Fig. 5.

There are three exceptions to this standard convention of the embrace. In 1505, Giambattista Cima da Conegliano broke with the common representation of David and Jonathan (Fig. 6). He chose to depict the two friends walking in the countryside. David has just triumphed over Goliath, his face is contracted, his eyes are a little glazed because of the emotion of the fight. He's carrying by the hair the head of the giant he recently killed. Goliath's beard and hair create a very strange round shape. Strangely enough, David doesn't hold his slingshot, but a long scimitar that he presses on his shoulder while hold-



Fig. 6: Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano, *David and Jonathan* (oil on wood, 40,6x39,4 cm, ca. 1505–10 AD).

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, Salting, 16.



nice at that time.<sup>19</sup> In the context of the Italian wars, the King of Judea tended to become the hero of the Serenissima who wanted to present herself as the Elected People. The exhilaration of heroic virtues, the hope of having God with one's self, the will to know a great destiny, explain this craze for the little shepherd who overcomes a hero stronger than himself. It most probably explains the change in Conegliano's representation.

As for iconological innovation, a good example is the work of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederick Leighton, *Jonathan's Token to David*, even though there's no representation of David in the scene (Fig. 7). The scene shows Jonathan preparing his first arrow to warn David of Saul's plot.



Fig. 7: Frederic Leighton, *Jonathan's Token to David* (oil on canvas, 171x124 cm, ca. 1868).

This scene is a pretext to the picture of a male heroic beauty whose plastic is emphasized by comparison with the little slave. It is also a tribute to art history:

Jonathan adopts the pose that Michelangelo gave to David in his famous sculpture.

Finally, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872) proposes, in his illustration of the Bible, a much more virile vision of the two companions (Fig. 8).<sup>20</sup> His images had a great influence on religious art in Germany and Great Britain at the end of the 19th century. Breaking away from Raphael's predominant imitation, Schnorr offers images inspired by the strength and almost bru-



Fig. 8: Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Jonathan Lovingly Taketh His Leave of David* (Woodcut for *Die Bibel in Bildern*, 1860 AD).

<sup>19</sup> Kaplan, *Old Testament's Heroes*, 293.

<sup>20</sup> Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Bible*, 94 Pyper, *Love*, 51.

tality of Mantegna. Considering that religious art tended to get lost in sensuality and a certain taste for “art for art”, he offers more vigorous forms. They are only the support of moral teaching. It was also a way for him to resist the poor artistic quality of biblical illustrations mass-produced by the printing works of evangelical biblical societies. For him, those who illustrate the bible should not consider themselves as low-cost craftsmen, but as “Bible artists”.<sup>21</sup> The influence here is clearly Greek. Schnorr was inspired, even in the clothing of the characters, by the consolation scenes on ancient funerary stelae. David, dressed as a Greek traveler (including the hat), consoles Jonathan who adopted the famous “pose of melancholy” found in funerary reliefs. Like the characters in these same reliefs, he takes the hand of his friend as a sign of compassion (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10).



Fig. 9: Funerary relief of Artemon (Attica, ca. 350 BC).



Fig. 10: Funerary stele of Mnesarete (Attica, ca. 380 BC).

### 3. The Meaning of Rembrandt’s Painting

Why then did Rembrandt choose to break with all the usual patterns of representation, in such a way that after him no one would follow the path he had opened? A series of small incongruous details, when put together, point to a se-

<sup>21</sup> Grewe, *Painting*, 210–214.

cond reading of the composition. The first detail, which largely explains why the subject of the painting has been debated for so long by specialists, is the difference between the two figures. David looks young and almost feminine: he wears long hair, they are held by a chain that looks more like a jewel of a woman than a man's headband. One cannot recognize his face because, he has his back to the viewer; he stands in the very position of the prodigal son in the famous painting also in St. Petersburg. Jonathan, on the other hand, is portrayed as a middle-aged man, although the text explains that he



Fig. 11: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* (oil on panel, 58x46 cm, 1630 AD).

had been about the same age as David. His turban is resplendent. Usually, the turban serves as an attribute for Jews, after the disappearance of the traditional pointed hat: the change occurred from the fifteenth century and a visit of the Byzantine Emperor Jean VII Palaeologus in 1399, when “orientalism” was invented.<sup>22</sup> But in Rembrandt's painting, he also appears in the painter's self-portraits. In fact, Jonathan looks very much like the Amsterdam artist: a slightly round figure with sunken eyes, the same nose, the same mustache.

The building at the top of Jerusalem is also astonishing. It evokes the Dome of the Rock and comes close to a drawing of the Prentenkabinett of the Rijksmuseum featuring *Peter and John caring for the paralytic at the Temple Door*,<sup>23</sup> to another drawing, the *Triumph of Mordecai*, kept at the Detroit Institute of

<sup>22</sup> Kalmar, Jesus.

<sup>23</sup> Durham, *Biblical Rembrandt*, 98.



Fig. 12: Comparison of the depiction of Jerusalem in *Jeremiah* (left) and *David and Jonathan* (right).

Arts,<sup>24</sup> as also to the painting of the Rijksmuseum, *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Fig. 11). This representation of the Temple was traditional at that time because the Omar Mosque was regarded as the Temple of Herod. It can be found in a book illustrated by Jacques Callot, of which Rembrandt had a copy,<sup>25</sup> as well as in the illustrations of Jewish marriage contracts (the *ketubah*), or in engravings illustrating a text from the Easter Haggadah. How can we explain this presence of the Temple in the Holy City during the separation of David and Jonathan, whereas it was built years later, under the reign of David's own son, Solomon?

Only an allegoric reading allows to understand the scene: it corresponds perfectly to Rembrandt's tendency to start from traditional representations and isolate a scene to which he confers a depth that had previously been missing in art traditions.<sup>26</sup>

If we accept that Jonathan is Rembrandt, then David could be Saskia, the painter's beloved wife, who had just died. The painting would then represent the pain of separation. This hypothesis is not absurd, because Rembrandt owned a copy of Flavius Josephus, illustrated by Tobias Stimmer.<sup>27</sup> The Jewish historian, when describing the farewell scene in *Jewish Antiquities*, is much more precise about the feelings of both protagonists.

Then, after doing what had been prearranged, Jonathan sent back the boy who attended him to the city, and David was undisturbed in coming out to meet him and to speak with him. Appearing in the open, he fell at Jonathan's feet and did him homage, calling him the preserver of his life. But Jonathan raised him from the

<sup>24</sup> Perlove, Irenic.

<sup>25</sup> Hofstede De Groot, *Urkunden*, 203.

<sup>26</sup> Tümpel, *Discourse*. See Bialostocki, *New Look*.

<sup>27</sup> Wischnitzer, *Rembrandt*.

ground, and, putting their arms about each other, they took a long and tearful farewell, bewailing their youth, the companionship which was begrudged them and their coming separation, which seemed to them nothing less than death. Then, hardly recovering from their lamentation and exhorting each other to remember their oaths, they parted.<sup>28</sup>

*Their coming separation, which seemed to them nothing less than death.* Could Rembrandt, inconsolable at the loss of his wife, ignore this sentence? How the pain of the separation of the two friends could not be close to the loss of the loved one? In the biblical text, this pain is premonitory. Jonathan will soon die at the battle of Gilboa, next to Saul.

However, in Rembrandt's case, this pain is not without hope, as the anachronistic presence of the sacred building of Solomon testifies. In Rembrandt's work, the Temple has a symbolic depth. The Amsterdam painter was strongly influenced by the hopes and expectations of the Jews of his time, who were waiting for the construction of a "third temple", the eschatological temple.<sup>29</sup> This Temple will reconcile men with one another. It will be the place where the face-to-face with God will finally be restored, in a time when death will no longer rule. Despite the sorrow of David's imminent loss, despite the suffering of Saskia's death, hope has not vanished. It remains in the divine promises of the Messiah's return: love is as strong as death, and God cannot abandon His people.

If the scarce representations of David and Jonathan's episode made them the epitome of friendship, such as the illuminations of *La Somme le Roi* or even Conegliano, Rembrandt gives a completely different meaning to their farewell. His composition insists on the depth of their feelings and on their difficulty to leave: their embrace is not only the mere testimony of affection, it is a demonstration of sorrow and distress. In doing so, Rembrandt makes David and Jonathan's story a parable about the suffering of separation, whether temporary or permanent. Transposing his own grief into biblical history, he gives it universal significance. What would be very anachronistically called a "mourning process" has only one outcome for him: the vision of the Temple, *i.e.* the trust in God. *The Farewell of David and Jonathan* is not only a meditation on love and death, but also a theological reflection on salvation.

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<sup>28</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 6:240–241 translation Thackeray / Marcus, Josephus V, 287.

<sup>29</sup> Perlove, Irenic, 53–54.

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„Die Bibel in der Kunst“ ist ein Projekt der Deutschen Bibelgesellschaft

Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft

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