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Judah and Tamar

Arent de Gelder
(Dordrecht 1645 – 1727 Dordrecht)

ca. 1680–85
oil on canvas
111 x 103.1 cm
AG-100



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Arent de Gelder, perhaps more than any other Rembrandt pupil, shared his master's profound interest in the human aspect of biblical stories. Most of De Gelder's history paintings focus on the private interaction of a few large-scale figures where psychological relationships rather than narrative gestures are emphasized. Although De Gelder repeatedly portrayed the tender warmth of the holy family in his paintings, he was also fascinated with the human frailties of biblical characters that underlie and help explain their actions. In this instance, he has focused on the sexual exchange between Judah and his stepdaughter Tamar, disguised as a harlot, bringing the viewer so close to this indecent encounter that one can almost feel the physical intensity of their relationship.

The story that inspired De Gelder's painting occurs in chapter 38 of the book of Genesis. There it is told how Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah, married off the eldest of his three sons, Er, to Tamar. The marriage remained childless, for "Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord slew him" (Genesis 38:7). After Er's death, his brother Onan—now bound by the Law of Levirate to marry Tamar—refused to procreate in his brother's place and was likewise slain by God (Genesis 38:9–10). After the still-childless Tamar was prevented by Judah from marrying his youngest son, Shelah, and Judah's wife had died, Tamar—dressed as a prostitute—seduced her unsuspecting father-in-law. "When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot; because she had covered her face" (Genesis 38:15). As payment, Judah promised Tamar a kid from his flock and gave her three pledges. "And he said, what pledge shall I give thee? And she said, Thy signet, and thy bracelets, and thy staff that is in thine hand. And he gave it her, and came in unto her, and she conceived by him" (Genesis 38:18). When her pregnancy was discovered, Tamar was accused of harlotry and condemned, also by Judah, to death by burning. Only when she came forth with the pledges did Judah admit his guilt and she was spared. The offspring produced by Tamar and her father-in-law were the twins Pharez and Zarah.

The special meaning to Christianity of the story of Judah and Tamar lies in the fact that the "indecent relationship" between the two produced Pharez who, according to Matthew 1:3 (see also Luke 3:33), was a forefather of David and therefore an ancestor of Christ. Tamar thus appears in the genealogical tree as the progenitrix of the royal house from which—in addition to David and Solomon—Christ was born. Tamar's significance for the genealogy of Christ therefore explains her important role in patristic literature

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Maarten van Heemskerck, *Judah and Tamar*, 1532, oil on canvas, 138 x 163 cm, formerly Berlin, Schloss Grunewald (now lost)



Fig 2. Ferdinand Bol, *Judah and Tamar*, 1644, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. 17.3268, Photograph ©2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

and later biblical exegesis. For example, Tamar is equated with the Church (*ekklesia*), which gave twins to Judah, son of the patriarch Jacob. In other readings, Judah's surrendering of his staff and signet to Tamar is interpreted as a reference to Christ, who gave the Church his treasures: the seal of faith and belief in the Cross.^[1] Nonetheless, pictorial representations of the story of Judah and Tamar are rare in medieval art.^[2] Even series of prints from the late Middle Ages and Renaissance that center on representations of men who were the victims of crafty women—and certainly Judah could count among them—do not include this couple.^[3]

Of particular importance to the development of the theme in late medieval art are two series of prints by Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574). Each of the four etchings/engravings that comprise each set shows a different scene, with the depiction of the handing over of the pledges at the side of the road forming the prelude to the story.^[4] As early as 1532, Van Heemskerck had portrayed this episode in what was probably the earliest known large-format painting, which hung in Jagdschloss Grunewald in Berlin until 1945 but subsequently disappeared (**fig 1**).^[5] His painting contains certain motifs that find an echo in De Gelder's work: the proximity to the viewer of the figures, Tamar's seductive hand on her father-in-law's chin, and the slung legs of the couple, a motif that stresses the sexual nature of the encounter.^[6] Most of the examples produced in the Northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century also show the meeting of Judah and Tamar on the road and the handing over of the pledges (Genesis 38:14–18).^[7] These depictions, however, are mostly paintings with small figures, usually with a luxuriant landscape in the background.^[8] Surprisingly, no firmly attributed representation of the theme is known by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), with whom De Gelder studied.^[9] Before De Gelder, the only Rembrandt pupil to treat this subject was Ferdinand Bol (1616–80), who produced a large painting with three-quarter-length figures in 1644 (**fig 2**).^[10]

The story of Judah and Tamar belongs, along with scenes from the book of Esther, to the Old Testament events De Gelder most frequently depicted. In addition to the present work, De Gelder painted at least five other versions of this theme.^[11] A striking feature of the painting in the Leiden Collection is the fact that, although Tamar wears a veil as described in the Bible (Genesis 38:15), the veil is lifted, whereas according to scripture it was precisely Tamar's covered face that prevented Judah from recognizing her. De Gelder depicted her fully veiled in the two versions in private collections and the one in the Mauritshuis.^[12] In this context, it is interesting to note what contemporary theologians had to say about the veil motif. For example, the



Utrecht theologian Franciscus Burmans (Burmanus) wrote in 1668 that Tamar wore a veil only so that she would not be recognized, because it was not whores but respectable women who covered their faces in public out of modesty.^[13]

The version in the Leiden Collection differs from the other versions of the theme in the less drastic manner of the couple's advances. Even though a number of motifs—Judah's embrace of Tamar, each of them touching the other's chin, and the phallic shape of the staff visible between Judah's legs—clearly refer to the sexual character of the scene, here De Gelder has depicted it with more restraint and delicacy than in his other versions of the theme. Similarly, the two appear to differ less in age than in the version in Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston,^[14] which is dated to 1681 and tones down the aspect of the “unequal lovers.” It was this very theme of the “unequal couple” that, since the sixteenth century, had become firmly established as a subject in literature and art, providing opportunities for moralizing and mockery. Both stylistically and with respect to the color scheme, which is dominated by brown, green, and red tones, this painting can be dated to the first half of the 1680s.

- Volker Manuth, 2017

Endnotes

1. For the interpretation of Genesis 38 in the writings of the church fathers and other medieval theologians, see Hans Martin von Erffa, *Ikonomie der Genesis: Die christlichen Bildthemen aus dem Alten Testament und ihre Quellen*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1995), 2: 438–45, esp. 442.
2. See Reiner Hausscherr, “Juda und Thamar,” in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum, 8 vols. (Rome, 1968–76), 2: 443.
3. See Yvonne Bleyerveld, *Hoe bedriechelijk dat die vrouwen zijn: Vrouwenlisten in de beeldende kunst in de Nederlanden circa 1350–1650* (Leiden, 2000), 247–48.
4. For the first series of prints, see Friedrich Wilhelm Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*, 72 vols. (Amsterdam, 1949–2010), 4: 228, nos. 58–62; 8: 229, nos. 2–4, and Wouter Kloek, et al., *Kunst voor de beeldenstorm: Noordnederlandse kunst 1525–1580* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1986), 260, no. 142.1–4 (ill.); for the other series of prints, see Friedrich Wilhelm Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*, 72 vols. (Amsterdam, 1949–2010), 4: 101, nos. 31–34; 8: 246, nos. 423–26, and Wouter Kloek, et al., *Kunst voor de beeldenstorm: Noordnederlandse kunst 1525–1580* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1986), 324, 203.1–4 (ill.).
5. Rainald Grosshans, *Maerten van Heemskerck: Die Gemälde* (Berlin, 1980), no. 14 (ill.).
6. See Leo Steinberg, “Michelangelo’s Florentine Pietà: The Missing Leg,” *Art Bulletin* 50 (1968): 343–53. For the motif of the “slung leg” in different contexts, see also Leo Steinberg, “The Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michelangelo’s Pietàs,” in *Studies in Erotic Art*, ed. Theodore Bowie and Cornelia V. Christenson (New York, 1970), 240–42.
7. On the iconography of the subject in Netherlandish painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Gina Strumwasser, “Heroes, Heroines, and Heroic Tales from the Old Testament: An Iconographic Analysis of the Most Frequently Represented Old Testament Subjects in Netherlandish Painting, ca. 1430–1570” (PhD diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1979), 129–31, and Volker Manuth, “Ikonographische Studien zu den Historien des Alten Testaments bei Rembrandt und seiner frühen Amsterdamer Schule: Mit einem Katalog der biblischen Gemälde des Jan Victors” (PhD diss. Freie Universität Berlin, 1987), 101–17.
8. See, for example, Gerbrand van den Eeckhout’s painting of 1645 in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow (Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 401 [ill.], and, more recently, Marina Senenko, *The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts: Collection of Dutch Paintings: XVII–XIX Centuries* [Moscow, 2009], 142, no. 406). See also the related drawing in the Albertina in Vienna (Werner Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, ed. and trans. Walter L. Strauss 10 vols. [New York, 1979–92], 3: no. 610

[ill.]).

9. A drawing in the collection of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (pen and brown ink and brown washes, 130 x 155 mm, inv. no. R9; Benesch A113) with a depiction of the turbaned Judah sitting next to the veiled Tamar in front of trees and bushes, formerly attributed to Rembrandt, has recently been attributed to his pupil Willem Drost (1633–59); see Werner Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, ed. and trans. Walter L. Struass, 10 vols. (New York, 1979–), 3: no. 560x (ill.).
10. See Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 30, 92, no. 7.
11. The other versions are: (1) Private collection, The Netherlands; see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–95), 2: no. 728 (ill.); Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), no. 11. (2) Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen, Mauritshuis, The Hague; see Sumowski, 2: no. 758 (ill.); Von Moltke, no. 12 (ill.). (3) The Agnes Etherington Art Centre (from the Bader Collection), Kingston, Ontario; see Sumowski, 2: no. 729 (ill.); Von Moltke, no. 13 (ill.); and David DeWitt, *The Bader Collection: Dutch and Flemish Paintings* (Exh. cat. Kingston, Ontario, The Agnes Etherington Art Centre) (Kingston, 2008), no. 82 (ill.). (4) Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna; see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–95), 2: no. 725 (ill., as “Boas and Ruth”); Renate Trnek, *Die holländischen Gemälde des 17. Jahrhunderts in der Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste in Wien* (Vienna, 1992), no. 47 (ill., as “Judah and Tamar?”); and Von Moltke, no. 2 (ill., as “Lot and His Daughters”). (5) Present whereabouts unknown (formerly Wetzlar Collection, Amsterdam); see Sumowski, 2:1158 n. 28.
12. Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen, Mauritshuis, The Hague; see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–95), 2: no. 758 (ill.); Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), no. 12 (ill.).
13. See Franciscus Burmans, *De Wet ende Getuigenisse, ofte Uitlegginge ende Btragtinge van de verborgentheden ende voornaamste saken des Wets, ofte boeken Mosis* (Utrecht, 1668), 264; Volker Manuth in Dirck Bijker et al., eds., *Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), 142 nn. 5 and 6.
14. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre (from the Bader Collection), Kingston, Ontario; see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–95), 2: no. 729 (ill.); Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), no. 13 (ill.); and David DeWitt, *The Bader Collection: Dutch and Flemish Paintings* (Exh. cat. Kingston, Ontario, The Agnes Etherington Art Centre) (Kingston, 2008), no. 82 (ill.).

Provenance

- Possibly Count Santar, Lisbon, March 1909.
- Conde de Magalhães, Palace of S. José, Lisbon, and by descent (sale, Christie's, London, 7 December 2006, no. 25 [Johnny van Haeften, London, 2006]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Kansas City, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, December 2008–December 2009 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Lilienfeld, Karl. *Arent de Gelder: Sein Leben und seine Kunst*. The Hague, 1914, 131–32, no. 14.
- Sumowski, Werner. *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. 6 vols. Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94, 5: 3101, no. 2090, 3223.
- Huys Janssen, Paul, and Werner Sumowski, eds. *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Rembrandt's Academy*. Exh. cat. The Hague, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder. Zwolle, 1992, 166 n. 9.
- Von Moltke, Joachim Wolfgang. *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727*. Doornspijk, 1994, 111–12, no. D3, 120, no. L11.

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed, has been lined. A large square of red lead priming surrounded by narrow unprimed borders was revealed along the support reverse when the previous lining was removed. The unprimed borders indicate the priming was applied while the support was attached to a four-member stretcher, and the various border widths suggest that the support dimensions are unaltered along the upper edge, are trimmed slightly along the left edge, are trimmed a bit more



along the lower edge, and are trimmed an unknown amount along the right edge where no border remains. There is a black stencil, two paper labels, and white chalk along the stretcher and red lead priming along the support reverse but no wax collection seals or import stamps along the support, lining, or stretcher reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied with loose, fluid brushstrokes in thin, smooth, transparent glazes through the background, allowing the underlayers to show through, and more opaquely through the two figures. Highlights have been applied in low impasto; areas of detail along Tamar's proper left sleeve and along the edge of the brocade and clasp of Judah's cape, which has fallen to his waist, have been scratched into glazes of wet paint with the reverse of a brush.^[1]

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images and pentimenti reveal minor compositional changes to the position of the back of Judah's proper left hand and to the fingers on both of Tamar's hands.

The painting is unsigned and undated. A false signature that read "Rembrandt f." was removed during conservation treatment.

The painting was cleaned, lined, and restored in 2007 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. See Bader Collection version of this subject in which the brocade edge of Judah's cape remains fastened with a clasp along his collar (digital image provided by Dominique Surh, curator, The Leiden Collection).