Patrick Bade | Rembrandt and the Bible

– Well, this image is of Moses breaking the tablets and it's painted by Rembrandt right at the end of his life. Rembrandt was profoundly engaged with the Bible all the way through his career. Primarily, I would say with the Jewish Bible. He also, of course, paints pictures from the Christian New Testament, but I'm going to concentrate on the former today. Here is Rembrandt in two self portraits. One at age 23 at the beginning of his career, and age 63, in the last year of his life on the right-hand side. I would claim that Rembrandt is the greatest religious artist of the 17th century. Maybe I would go even further and claim that he is the greatest of all European religious painters. And this is in a way unexpected, given his background in 17th century Holland. He's born in 1606 in the midst of the 80 Year War of Independence, and this was a religious war. After the Reformation, Europe was convulsed by religious wars for the remainder of the 16th and well into the 17th centuries. The Calvinists in Netherlands were very brutally suppressed and persecuted by their Spanish rulers and they broke away. We see two images here of the terrible atrocities that occurred in this long bitter war of independence. The so-called Spanish Fury when Antwerp was sacked by Spanish troops in 1576, and an image on the right-hand side of a Dutchman sifting through the ashes of his wife, who had been burnt for being a Protestant. The Dutch is a nation I admire greatly, very plucky, courageous nation, particularly at this time. They fought off, it's a bit like the Ukrainians fighting off Russia. They were a small country fighting off the mightiest empire in the world, and at the same time building up their own huge commercial and colonial empire. So they finally got international recognition as an independent country in 1648 with The Treaty of Westphalia. This is an image of the signing of that treaty on the left-hand side. And the map on the right hand side shows "Leo Belgicus." It's a map of the Netherlands, transformed into the form of a triumphant lion. One of the things I most admire about the Dutch, well, two things I admire, their tolerance and their pragmatism. And those two things are closely linked. They had, through bitter experience, they learned the value of tolerance. And in many ways 17th century Holland was the most tolerant nation in Europe, very willing to accept people of other faiths, people of other races. It was certainly the best nation in Europe to be Jewish in the 17th century. This is the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam built in the 1680s. It was those magnificent synagogue to be built in Western Europe since the Middle Ages. So that was, but I said it's linked to pragmatism because the Dutch understood that tolerance and taking in refugees is actually good for the economy, it's good for business. I wish a few more people would understand this in Europe at the moment, we've got this horrible intolerance and people wanting to turn away refugees. Not only is it inhuman, it's also very stupid since we actually need them with ageing populations and so on, we need them for our workforce. But anyway, the Dutch, as I said, they're

extremely pragmatic. And I think it wasn't just that they were tolerant of the Jews, they realised that Jews were good for business and that's why they wanted them. Of course, there is a dark side to all of this, and the 17th century sees the development of the slave trade, which is one of the great crimes in human history and the Dutch played quite an important role as the English did in this trade in the 17th and the 18th century. And that image at the top shows you the terrible conditions of slaves in chains, in the holds of ships being taken across the Atlantic with a huge mortality rate. So, as I said, they're very tolerant. They had a bit of a problem, of course, with the Catholics because they were constantly under threat from the Catholic Spanish and the Catholic French. Nevertheless, there was actually quite a significant percentage of the Dutch population in the 17th century, and as today, that remained Catholic. And they followed a policy of don't ask, don't tell. As as long as the Catholics kept their, they worshipped in private and they didn't make a fuss about it, the Dutch were happy to let them get on with it. And this is a rather strange painting by Vermeer with a title "The Allegory of Faith." Vermeer of course was a Catholic, and this is an express of his Catholic faith. But the bulk of population were Calvinist. So Holland, like every other country in Europe, had great mediaeval churches. And those churches, up until the reformation, would've been full of colour. You would've had stained glass windows, you would've had alter pieces, you would've had frescoes. But the Calvinist take the Jewish strictures against the graven image very, very seriously indeed with actually very sad consequences, because as the Dutch revolt broke out, there were also outbreaks of iconoclasm. So Protestant mobs going to churches and destroying many masterpieces by the great Flemish artists of the 15th century, Van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and so on. And as you can see, the churches were then whitewashed. And so there is no patronage, no official patronage of religious art in Holland, in Calvinist Holland in the 17th century. This makes Rembrandt all the more amazing, 'cause these pictures, these pictures were painted because he wanted to paint them. And they're pictures that are painted out of private devotion, they weren't intended to be alter pieces. They weren't intended to hang in churches. They were going to hang in people's houses. And so he draws very heavily upon the Bible. This of course is the Christian New Testament. It's the nativity of Jesus Christ. And I think it's an interesting comparison to make with the only other painter of the 17th century that I would be inclined to put on a level of genius with Rembrandt. And that is the Italian, the Spanish painter, Velazquez, supremely great painter. And of course he was working in Catholic Spain, and he was getting commissions from the Catholic Church for alter pieces like this one of "The Coronation of the Virgin" on the left-hand side. But marvellous as Velazquez is a painter. I actually don't get much sense of religious devotion or feeling from any of his paintings. And this is a gorgeous painting of a beautiful woman who seems to be sitting on a sofa in the sky. Here's a closer detail of the Velazquez on the left hand side. A big difference, of course,

between Rembrandt and the Dutch artists and the artists in Catholic Europe is that the Catholic artists are very often painting the lives of the saints. This is not subject matter that interests Rembrandt or any of his Dutch contemporaries. Here is another Velazquez I'll show you this. I think it's a marvellous piece of painting. It shows, it tells the story of Thomas Aquinas. He's a mediaeval saint who was born to a princely family and his family did not want him to take Holy Orders. So they lock him in a house with a drop-dead gorgeous woman whose job it is to seduce him away from his intention to take Holy Orders. And he feels tempted. And so he takes a burning piece of wood from the fire and he makes a charcoal cross on the wall and God sends a hit squad of angels to rescue him from the naughty woman. You can see her rushing off in the distance on the left-hand side. And well I think, as said, I think it's the most wonderful piece of painting, but it's so unconvincing as a religious image. Have you ever seen a less convincing angel than this one? I mean, he's clearly some kind of street boy dressed up in a nightie. He's too real to be convincing as an angel. And I don't believe that those, he could really fly with those wings. And I think they're artificially attached to his back. Well, Rembrandt, as I said, was born in 1606 in the town of Leiden in Holland. This is a map of how it was in his day, and I think if he could come back, he'd probably, it hasn't changed very much, he'd probably be able to find his way around his native city quite easily. His father was a miller, but a prosperous one. He's one of nine children. And who is this woman? She, traditionally in the 19th century, until quite recently, she was always referred to as Rembrandt's mother until somebody pointed out Rembrandt was 20 when he painted this picture. This woman is too old to be Rembrandt's mother, but he clearly had a relationship with her, 'cause he paints her again and again at the beginning of his career when he's still in Leiden. And so, well, maybe she's his grandmother or an aunt or just somebody who was very close to him. And she seems to have been a very pious woman, at least we assume so from the images that Rembrandt painted of her showing her reading the Bible and praying. She also served as a model for Rembrandt's pupil and assistant Garrit Dou. And this is a Garrit Dou of the same woman, very clearly the same woman again, reading the Bible. Here is a painting, this is a later painting, of a different woman by another Rembrandt pupil. And this is Nicolaes Maes and it's a painting with quite a kind of a contradictory moral really. She's there, she is of course, reading the Bible, but she's, it's also a painting really, of dereliction of duty because while reading the Bible, she's taking a nap. She's fallen asleep. And the keys beside her, of course, these kind of details in Dutch paintings are always there for a meaning. They mean something. And this, you know, the keys are really symbol of her duties. So she's not only neglecting her Bible reading, she's neglecting her daily duties. This is a painting of 1641 by Rembrandt of the Mennonite Preacher Anslo talking to his wife. I must say I feel a bit sorry for her. I can just, obviously, you can see he's well away with his preaching and she's sitting there meekly listening to her husband. Well, it's thought that Rembrandt

himself was a Mennonite. So he's not strictly speaking at Calvinist. Mennonites were a Protestant sect, not dissimilar to the Quakers. They believe in adult baptism. They think that you should, if you want to be Christian, it should be a matter of informed choice as an adult, not something that is done to you when you are born. And they're also, like the Quakers, they are pacifists. Here's the detail. You can see, you know, his mouth open. He's in mid-speech and she is listening very respectfully to her husband. Here is Rembrandt still in Leiden. This is a painting here he is in his studio, rather modest looking studio, this is 1628. We know names of three different teachers, but the most important teacher was an Amsterdam artist called Pieter Lastman. This is a painting by Pieter Lastman. Rembrandt presumably went to study with him in Amsterdam for several months. Lastman, importantly, had spent several years in Italy. Rembrandt never went to Italy. This was something that was commented on at the time. People felt that he should have gone to Italy if he really wanted to perfect his art. But as Kenneth Clark showed in the book titled, "Rembrandt in the Italian Renaissance," Rembrandt was very well informed about Italian art. Partly, I think, through his teacher Pieter Lastman, partly through other Dutch artists, the Utrecht artists I'll mention in a minute, who had all been to Italy and in particular had been impressed by Caravaggio, but also because Amsterdam was a major centre of the art trades, he had lots of opportunities to see Italian paintings passing through the art trade in Amsterdam. So this is his teacher, Pieter Lastman. This is a biblical subject. This is from the Jewish Bible. And it's a beautiful story. It's the book of Ruth and it's a story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth's husband has died, all the men in her family have died, and she begs to live with her mother-in-law. In the English, well the Authorised Version, it's the passage that begins "Intreat me not to leave thee." And it's actually, I think, one of the more heartwarming stories in the Bible. So I'm making a comparison here. This is Pieter Lastman on the right-hand side. It's a rather smooth style, quite highly detailed. And this painting on the left-hand side is probably the earliest surviving painting by Rembrandt. It's in the delightful Cognacq-Jay Museum. I was just there actually a couple of weeks ago with a group of Lockdown alumni who turned up in Paris and we went to see this museum. We saw this painting, which is the story of Balaam, who is a rather ambiguous figure in the Bible. Sometimes seen as positive, sometimes seen in a very negative way. And the story being told here is he displeased God. And so God decides to interrupt his journey and he sends an angel to stop him on his donkey in their tracks. But he can't see the angel and the donkey can. and the donkey is then given powers of speech and the donkey turns around and says, "Hey, look out, here's an angel with a whopping sword right behind you." And he's still trying to whip the donkey and make it continue. I love the way, it's almost in a sort of Walt Disney way that the donkey turns and speaks to Balaam in this picture. I've already shown that very, very moving picture of the woman who used to be thought of as Rembrandt's mother. So he's in his early twenties, he's already fascinated by old age. I can't think of any other artists

really in the history of Western art. Most artists will prefer to paint people who are young, gorgeous, but Rembrandt really loves the faces of old people. This is another biblical story. It's from the book of Tobit, which I think is not, it's recognised by being part of the Bible by Christians, but I think most orthodox Jews don't recognise it. Not part of the Jewish cannon of the Bible, but it's a very typical story. And God, you know, we're told he's a jealous God. He's so jealous and in some ways so petty in the Old Testament. He's constantly testing believers to see, testing their faith, testing to see how much they love him. And so Tobit and his wife, Anna, are tested, they're reduced to poverty and he becomes blind. And she comes home one day holding a kid. Of course that's a valuable item. She's been given it as a reward for her hard work, but he thinks she must have stolen it. And he is distraught and he prays for death. So Rembrandt is a great storyteller, and I think that is part of the attraction of the Jewish Bible for him, that it is so full of great stories for him to illustrate. Here, another very moving beautiful painting. This one's in the National Gallery in London, of Tobit and Anna in extreme old age, sitting together. This probably a joint exercise by Rembrandt and his assistant or pupil Garrit Dou. The hand of both artists has been detected in this picture. So more images of old age. And one, I feel, that the same model has posed for both of these. An old man with a wonderful face who obviously fascinated Rembrandt. One is New Testament and one is Old Testament. The one on the left-hand side is "St. Paul at his Desk." And the one on the right-hand side is "Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem." These are early paintings, dating from the beginning of the 1630s. Still quite tightly painted, though even the sort of rather tight paintings of the 1630s. Why Rembrandt? When you stand in front of them and you get close to them, they actually have a wonderful, a quite varied paint texture, unlike the paintings of some of his pupils and imitators like Dou, where it's a very sort of rather bland, glossy, smooth surface. Cause the principle expressive dramatic element in these pictures is light. And in the painting of Paul on the left-hand side, he used the device which he's borrowed from the Dutch Caravaggisti artists, the Utrecht artists, Ter Brugghen, Honthorst, and Baburen, who'd all been to Italy and been very influenced by Caravaggio. Although this is actually not a device that Caravaggio himself uses, or very rarely uses, the hidden light source, but becomes a standard device with the Dutch artists. Here you see how, although this is, as I said, quite tightly painted, it is sumptuously painted, and Rembrandt has a great gift for rendering shimmering surfaces and rich textures, furs, and materials and so on. This is a drawing made around the same time. It's actually dated 1633 and signed by Rembrandt. So it's unusual really to find drawings that are signed 'cause this is presumably a preliminary study for a painting. And it seems to be the same man. But this is for, this is an Old Testament, this is a Jewish Bible subject. This is "The Drunkenness of Lot." So this is, the 1630s is the height of the Baroque, which is a movement that starts in Italy at the very beginning of the 17th century and it

spreads around Europe. Baroque is a very theatrical style. It's a dramatic, it's an operatic style. And you can see this is an extremely dramatic, I would say cinematic. Again, Kenneth Clark pointed out how cinematic Caravaggio is and I think Rembrandt also, especially in the early parts of his career, can be very cinematic and can use light as, you know, this kind of light you might find in a film noir, or rather arty film. Once again, of course we've got the hidden light source, the light source is a candle which is hidden from us by the figure who's back to us, who has his back to us in the left foreground. This is a New Testament subject. This is Judas trying to return the 30 pieces of silver which he was given for betraying Jesus Christ. And we see his anguish in his body language and his gesture. And we see the contempt of the people who are rejecting the coins and don't want them back again. Another New Testament subject, this is another picture of course, which I was looking at with my group just a few days ago. It's a tiny picture. Exquisite. It's in another Paris museum, it's in the museum Jacquemart-Andre, and it's "The Supper at Emmaus." Christ has been crucified, he's been resurrected. He meets up with disciples at Emmaus and they eat together and they don't initially recognise him. And this painting shows the moment where the disciple seated at the table with him realises that he's sitting with a resurrected dead man. So very dramatic again, facial expression, gestures, movement. And once again, the device of the hidden light source, which as I said was a standard device with the Caravaggisti artists from Utrecht in the south of Netherland. This is a painting by Honthorst. It's actually a brothel scene, although it is also probably a biblical scene, because, a New Testament biblical scene, 'cause it probably represents the prodigal son behaving badly in a brothel. Honthorst again on the left-hand side, and Rembrandt on the right where the light seems to actually emanate from the Christ child. Now this is a drawing that Rembrandt made in 1633 and we know the day he made it 'cause he inscribed on the drawing. "This was drawn from my beloved when she was 21, three days after our betrothal, the 8th of June, 1633." And we had the marriage bans signed by Rembrandt on the right-hand side. And Rembrandt celebrated. I mean, clearly he loved his wife very much. You can see from that inscription. And I think we know that he loved her too, from the many, many loving intimate drawings that he made of her having her hair done, in bed when she's not well, and so on. I think this was obviously a very, very close and happy marriage. So this painting painted to celebrate his marriage seems a little odd to us, because in terms of the imagery of the time, this is clearly again a brothel scene. And he's showing his beloved wife as a prostitute and she's sitting on his knee and he's showing himself as her customer. I can't really explain this to you, I really puzzled over this, but it is, again, it's connected to the theme of the prodigal son, which is a very, very popular theme in the period. This is a brothel scene by Jan Steen, which is again, it's the drunken man in foreground who's having his watch stolen, is the prodigal son. And there is also a strange equivalent in the work of Vermeer. This is one of the earliest surviving paintings of Vermeer. And again, it's clearly a brothel

scene and probably a prodigal son scene, so with biblical moralising connotations. And it's assumed that the man raising the glass and laughing and looking at us and engaging our attention is a self-portrait of Vermeer. So why, and the woman is clearly recognisable as a model for many of Vermeer's paintings and is soon to be his wife. So extremely odd, really, to depict your wife being fondled by a customer who's dropping a coin into her hand. The theme of the prodigal son is one that Rembrandt came back to in a much more serious and profound way right at the end of his life. This is a very late painting of Rembrandt that's in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. And it's "The Return of the Prodigal Son" being forgiven and embraced by his father. Of course, it's a parable, it has great meaning for Christians. A general application of the sinner repenting and being forgiven by God. And here's a detail of the sumptuously, gorgeously painted with this amazing impasto and this very rich, painterly surface that is characteristic of his late work. Now another theme that, from the Jewish Bible, that preoccupies Rembrandt and many other Dutch artists, including several of his pupils, is the story of the expulsion by Abraham of Hagar and Ishmael. This is a very hard story to really understand. I suppose there's everything in the Bible, isn't there? Everything in the Jewish Bible, there is all of Jewish experience, all of human experience rather, good and bad. And this is certainly not a very nice story. Story is that Abraham's wife Sarah couldn't conceive, so she presents him with an Egyptian girl, a slave who can have a baby. She has the baby, Ishmael. Ishmael is is Abraham's first-born son. But then belatedly of course, Sarah conceives Isaac, and then she doesn't want Hagar around anymore. So she persuades Abraham to drive her and Ishmael out into the desert, presumably to die of thirst and hunger. And in fact, an angel intervenes and Ishmael doesn't die. And he goes on to found another race, which some people interpret as being the Arabs. So this painting, this is an early painting. It's actually, it's in the Victoria and Albert Museum, so anybody can walk in off the street and see it any day. But the Victoria and Albert Museum has a collection of paintings on an upper floor with wonderful things in it, what marvellous Degas, Tiepolo, all sorts of terrific things. And people don't go to the V&A to see paintings, so it's very strange. If you want to see this painting, you can go out there and completely on your own with all these wonderful paintings. And again, it's a subject that he came back to. I think very powerfully with this etching, where we see the weeping Hagar and the little boy Ishmael heading off for the desert. And this painting on the left-hand side is by, again it's by Nicolaes Maes, who was a pupil of Rembrandt in Rembrandt's middle period. And I think you can see that it is, hmm, I think it's pretty directly inspired by the Rembrandt etching although the poses of Hagar and Ishmael are different. And there is this drawing on the right-hand side for the Nicolaes Maes painting, which I find very intriguing. Because something I think that Nicolaes Maes learned from Rembrandt is the importance of pose and gesture. And you can see that the drawing of little Ishmael, on the left-hand side, that Maes hasn't yet fully made up his mind which way is Ismael's face going to turn? Is he

looking back towards Abraham and his mother? Or, as you can see in the final painting, he's looking on outwards towards the journey that he's going to undertake with his mother. And this is another, this Jan Victors, he's another Rembrandt pupil, of the same subject. Again, I'm little curious maybe you have ideas or, why Rembrandt and why so many, it's a common subject. Why, it's such a hard story. Why, what meaning this would have for 17th century Dutch people and why they were attracted to that story? Oh, his, no, this one is Barent Fabritius. This one is the one by Jan Victors. As I said, it's a common, common subject in 17th century art. And I can't resist showing you this, 'cause I just saw this, I was on holiday last week, which is why I didn't speak to you last week. I was in northeast Italy in wonderful Trieste. Fascinating city and also went up to Udine and this is a fresco by Tiepolo, so it's a hundred years after Rembrandt, nearly a hundred years. It dates from about 1720 and it's in the archbishop's palace in Udine, and it's such a sort of, it's such a different attitude to Jewish Bible subject matter from Rembrandt. It's very 18th century, it's very Rococo, it's very frivolous, really, and humorous. So you can see that Tiepolo is actually rather making fun of Sarah. He's really, you know, this is the moment the angel comes to her to announce that she will finally give birth. And you can see that Tiepolo is really exaggerating her age. He's shown her as a wrinkled old crone with only two teeth. But he has a lot of fun with the angel, a very sexy angel, who seems to arrive from the Foiles Bergere and is showing off a shapely leg. Now as I said, there is everything in the Jewish Bible and there's a lot of horror. Because, as as I had a Catholic upbringing, we didn't really do, the Catholics don't really do the Old Testament very much. It was much more lives of saints or New Testament. So I only really read, it was only when I started to work for London Jewish Cultural Centre in the late 1990s that I did read the Jewish Bible from beginning to end and found it very fascinating, full of the most amazing stories. Horrific stories and very gory things. There's lots of sex and violence in the Bible. And of course Baroque artists really love sex and violence. And this is certainly the most gory and violent painting that Rembrandt ever painted. And he painted it as a gift for this man, Constantijn, Christiaan, Christiaan Huygens, who was a scientist, man of letters, courtier to the princely family, Family of Orange. And he had encouraged Rembrandt and he had mentored him in a way. And Rembrandt knew that he had a taste for paintings that are sort of the equivalent of video nasties, really violent paintings, which he used to have behind curtains. So presumably you went to dinner and then after dinner, and after dinner drinks, he'd whip back the curtain and show you some really horrific image. And this is really extremely, extremely graphic. You're probably quite thankful that my image is not that sharp. You can see Samsung's toes curling in agony as the dagger is plunged into his eyes. And the open mouthed Delilah with the hair in her hand, looking back. Now, what's that expression? It's really a mixture, isn't it? Rembrandt is so good at this. It's a, that expression is a mixture of triumph and horror, I think, of what she's

witnessing. And of course there's nothing more, you may want to look away for this. There's nothing more horrific really than images of eyeballs being pierced or slashed. So to the left is the famous opening shot of the Dali, Bunuel film "Un Chien Andalou," and on the right, a very famous image from Eisenstein's film the "The Battleship Potemkin." More operatic drama. This is "Belshazzar's Feast," the moment when the writing appears on the wall. And I always feel that if this painting could sing, it would be like one of those very dramatic trios or quartets you get in Verdi operas at high points of the drama. You can see everybody's mouth is open, and very typical of the Baroque is that you really, you are picking absolutely the moment of the drama. And this is emphasised by the fact that people are so shocked that the wine goblets are knocked over and the wine is actually in mid air. And so Rembrandt, in this sense very Baroque, interested in facial expression. These are various self portraits. I think he spent a lot of time early in his career pulling funny faces in front of the mirror, trying out different facial expressions. Talk about last minute. This is the sacrifice of Isaac. This is again God saying, you know, wanting, testing Abraham, orders him to slaughter his own son as a human sacrifice. And the the angel sent in took, this is not just 11th hour, this is 11th hour 59th minute, 59th second, and very brutal, isn't it, with the way the hand is over the face of his beloved son. And again, the knife that's going to be used to slash his throat actually in midair. Now these are two New Testament subjects. "The Presentation in the Temple," on the left, of the infant, Jesus. And "The Woman Taken in Adultery" on the right hand side, but I'm showing them to you because they both take place in Solomon's Temple. Of course Rembrandt had no very exact idea of what Solomon's Temple looked like, nobody did in Europe. All they had were the verbal descriptions in the Bible. There is the description of the twisting Solomonic columns, for instance, that he includes on the right hand side. So this is Rembrandt's fantasy of what Solomon's temple looked like. There you see the twisting Solomonic columns, but looking very, very Baroque and very European 17th century. Now the Bible has always been used as an excuse right up to the times of Cecil B. DeMille. Cecil B. DeMille was able to get away with more nudity and more sex and more depravity than any other director in Hollywood, even during the Hays Code period, by simply, you know, by using biblical themes. And there are certain episodes in the Bible like the story of Susanna being spied upon by the elders. And that is a, a very, very common theme in Western art. And clearly it's an excuse for a voyeuristic image of a young woman washing. This enchanting painting by Rembrandt that's in the National Gallery in London, probably shows his long-term lover after the death of his wife, Hendrickje Stoffels. And it's very probably connected with the theme of Susanna bathing and being spied upon. It may be a sketch, perhaps for a more elaborate painting. And it was a subject that he had painted earlier on, as in this picture. Another episode which gives the artist an excuse for a rather raunchy image is the story of Joseph who is lusted after by Potiphar's wife, she's a kind of cougar, kind of tiger woman. And she tries to seduce

him and he rejects her and then she falsely accuses him of rape. So we see a very explicit illustration of this subject in the etching by Rembrandt I think probably in etching Rembrandt had a greater freedom to deal with these subjects. And in a late painting on the right-hand side where, well, we can see Joseph throwing up his hands in horror at the accusation. Now this is, for me, is the finest of Rembrandt nudes. Another painting that's in Paris, it's in the Louvre, and it's "Bathsheba." And I think we can recognise the face of Hendrickje Stoffels in this painting. A beautiful painting, a sumptuous painting, I suppose for many an erotic painting. But so much more than that. The story of Bathsheba, again, a rather nasty story. David, again, spying on her while she's bathing and lusting after her. And arranging for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle so that he can enjoy her. And he, most of these paintings show the arrival of a letter from David to Bathsheba informing her of the death of her husband. That's Rubens on the left-hand side. Rembrandt. I think they make a very fascinating comparison. Rubens, it's a very, very blatantly sexy and kind of titillating picture, I would say, the Rubens. And in the Rubens of course, she hasn't yet received the news. The black servant is coming in to offer the letter to her. In the Rembrandt, she's had the letter, she's read the letter, she's digested the news and has a very different feeling to it. Again, what a marvellous rendition of a face this is with complex, contradictory emotions. Actually, I think predominantly sorrowful. Whereas Rubens' image of Bathsheba, she didn't mind, she's got rather come hither expression on her face on left hand. So I think probably the Rubens face is also based on his second wife, Helena Fourment. So you have two artists in a way, painting the great loves of their life at the time, Rubens with Helena Fourment and Rembrandt with Hendrickje Stoffels. Now, Rembrandt moved into this rather grand house in the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam in 1639. And he stayed there until he went bankrupt and he had to sell it in 1656. The house over the years of course has been gutted, but it's now being restored as far as possible. or as far as we think we know, to its appearance in Rembrandt's time based on drawings of that interior. Here is Saskia in bed, presumably at the time of one of her four pregnancies. And so this, living in the Jewish Quarter, obviously he was in close proximity to many Jews. And yeah, he painted many portraits of Jews. This is, he made two images of this man, Dr. Efrain Bueno, who was very distinguished physician and scholar. And it has been suggested that possibly these portraits were made by Rembrandt to give to Dr. Bueno in return for medical services for his wife Saskia. And this is a very fascinating document, of course. This is, you can see 1636. This is actually three years before he moved into that house. This is the Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel. And if you've been following Tudi's lectures, she, you will have heard her talk about him, who led a delegation of Jews from Amsterdam to London to negotiate the permission that Cromwell eventually gave for Jews to return to England. They'd been banned in the 13th century. And so yes, Rembrandt, before he moved into that house, we know that he was already interested in Jews and that he had already depicted them. This

very elaborate, highly finished etching is called "The Large Jewish Bride" that dates from the early 1630s and this marvellously free, bold drawing seems to be connected with it of a magnificently clothed Jewish bride from the same date. He may have made these studies in connection with this picture from 1635, which shows "The Wedding Feast of Samson." And in this picture, in this story, Samson presents a riddle to the guests. Rembrandt always very interested, as I said, in expressive gesture. I wonder if he watched Jews in conversation with a lot of gesticulation. And at the time that he was living in the Jewish quarter, he made these absolutely extraordinary portraits of Orthodox Jews. How did he do this? How did he get them to pose for him? It's extraordinary that they were willing to pose for him. These are not paintings, certainly not paintings that were commissioned. And I don't think he made them for money, 'cause I don't think many Dutch brokers would've wanted to buy one of these paintings to hang over their mantle piece. No, he made them because he wanted to make them, because he was interested in the people. He was fascinated by the Jews. And I think he was fascinated by the Jews for religious reasons because they are the people of the Bible. And as I said he was so engaged with the Bible, For me, these are amongst the most amazing portraits ever painted. And I think it's because it's often true artists, many, not just Rembrandt, but other artists, that when they're painting somebody who is in inverted commas "other," you know, from another culture, from another religion, from another race that they drop all the superficial things about rank and social things and they really examine the human being. And that's, I find this so amazing, this portrait. It's so alive, it is so human. And this rather truculent looking guy. I'm sure this is somebody you could so easily meet at Stamford Hill in an Orthodox Jewish community. And he applies what he's learned to his religious paintings. Of course, Jesus Christ was a Jew, Virgin Mary was a Jew, but Rembrandt is the first Western artist to show Jesus with Semitic features. We don't, nobody else does this until the mid to late 19th century. I think the next artist to actually show Jesus with Jewish features, facial features, is Max Liebermann in the 19th century. This is how, this is the normal way, Jesus is depicted. As sort of red haired or blonde and a very Aryan looking. This is Rubens on the right-hand side and just a kitsch religious postcard that I picked up on the left-hand side. Look at this, isn't that amazing? A wonderful, an extraordinary piece of painting as well. Absolutely amazing. And you could see actually incising lines` through the wet paint to give the impression of light gleaning on the bristles of Christ's beard. I think that Rembrandt is interested in the Bible for religious reasons. He also finds it such a rich source. As I've said, every human emotion, every human experience is narrated in the Bible. This is a painting of the 1640s and it shows the reconciliation of David with his favourite son Absalom. You can see actually here he has given Absalom gorgeous blonde hair. But that actually is significant because yeah, Absalom actually comes to a sticky end when his gorgeous hair gets caught in the branch of a tree. But this is, I think, of course it's related to the story of the

return of the prodigal son. What interests Rembrandt here I think, is the emotion of the reconciliation of a father and son. I want to finish off by looking to a group of late paintings of Rembrandt that seem to be, for me, amongst his most extraordinary and moving creations. He's moved on from that rather sensational, operatic Baroque style of the 1630s to something more profound, something more contemplative, more considered. This is the story of Haman, who, he was an evil character in the Bible, and he was the chief minister of the Persian King Ahasuerus and he plans the extermination of the Jewish community in Persia. But Esther, a wife of Ahasuerus, is able to intervene and reveal the evil plans of Haman. Haman is then sacked, and actually he's hanged. He's punished by being executed. And this shows the moment of his dismissal. What intrigues me about this painting is that he's not actually shown really as a villain. Rembrandt is more interested in his, he shows him actually as a rather, this gesture, of course, hand on the chest, is a gesture of expressing emotion that you're, I think, telling the truth. So I think actually what he's showing here on the face of Haman is remorse. So I think the gesture and the facial expression is showing sadness and remorse. And this, oh, this is such a marvellous painting, really an astonishing painting of Saul and David. And this Saul, of course, he becomes mad and tries to kill David. Look at this, the face, the madness in that face, the madness in the eye. And the wonderful face of David. Again, Kenneth Clark is very interesting about this. He says, "This is the face of a Jewish boy who's entirely absorbed in his music." And as he said, "This is a face you could see at the Wigmore Hall with a young Jewish musician absolutely absorbed in his music making." And my final image, I have to end with this one. I think this is one of the most moving paintings. When I first saw this, I first went to Amsterdam, God it's a long time ago, nearly half a century ago. And I stood in front of this picture and it made me cry. It's just such a moving image of love, really, and affection between two human beings. I mean, it's traditional title is "The Jewish Bride," but that title doesn't seem to go further back than the 19th century. And recent scholars have questioned whether the title is accurate at all and whether it is, although the faces are very individualised, aren't they? You really feel that they're painted from real people. But whether this is say, a commissioned portrait of a newly married Jewish couple or not, we don't really know. And a lot of scholars have actually speculated that it is actually probably a biblical couple that's represented. And it could be Abraham and Sarah, it could be Ruth and Boaz, or it could be Isaac and Rebecca. And so that's where I'm going to finish and we'll see what we've got in...

Q & A and Comments

Q: Who is, well, you say Rembrandt is the greatest European religious painter?

A: Well, I only say that because I, he maybe he's just the greatest religious painter. But I say that with caution, because of my ignorance of non-European art. I can't, you know, say he's the greatest religious artist in the world because my knowledge of non-Jewish, non Judeo-Christian religious art is too limited. Caravaggio, he's up there, he's a very great religious artist, odd enough, despite being, you know, a murderer and, you know, a nasty piece of work. I think Caravaggio is very great and profound religious artist. So he'd be, yeah, a rival, perhaps.

- Synagogue bench seats facing the women's gallery, not the arc, I'm sure you're right. I can't dispute that.

- This is Carla saying she lives in Holland in Leiden, the town where Rembrandt was born. Yeah, well, as I said, I have the greatest admiration for the Dutch, but though even the Dutch recently, every nation in Europe, Sweden, Italy, they're all showing some very ugly signs of intolerance and xenophobia. And that saddens me very much. A challenge for the Dutch to consider, as it was the Dutch that settled in South Africa.

- Calvinist Afrikaner. Yes. I wouldn't deny that the Dutch in their colonies were just as bad as any other Europeans and committed a lot of crimes. Yeah, that's very true. That Rembrandt of course gets darker and Rembrandt is primarily interested in light and shade. Velazquez starts off actually quite dark and influenced by Caravaggio, but Velazquez is later influenced by Titian and lightens up a lot and becomes very luminous and is a great colorist. I think that could be a painting of his mother, a woman of nine children at that time in history.

- I wonder if that Miriam is Miriam Stockard, 'cause she always used to give me very, very wonderful advice and know her knowledge of medical things. I love going around museums with her and she always had very interesting medical comments. She thinks it's possible that she could be a mother, or whoever that Miriam is.

- Sleeping when reading the Bible, dereliction of duty, very negative interpretation, rather up all night studying and finally succumbing to fatigue. I think you are very charitable, but it's not just my interpretation. I took that interpretation actually from the catalogue of the recent Nicolaes Maes exhibition in the National Gallery.

- The horse, "Guernica." Well, of course Picasso certainly had been very familiar with Rembrandt.

Q: Rembrandt's mother was Catholic. Is that true?

A: I'm not sure. I have to follow that one up. Be interesting.

- Talking donkey. Ensure I was inspired by the story of Balaam in Numbers. Thank you.

Q: Is, Balak is the king who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. South Reformed Church, Calvinist?

A: Yes. Which, the picture is, it was the one on the right-hand side, the picture of Jeremiah with all the magnificent metal work that presumably came from sacked Jerusalem.

Q: Do I think that Rembrandt's interest in the Bible is due to the depth of his religious belief?

A: Well, I think it's both. I think it's both. Absolutely.

- The Torah portion in which the story of Balaam and his donkey is called Parshat Balak of the second word in the portion Numbers. Yes. I'm sure you are right about that. There are many commentaries about Hagar being sent away. It's not a simple read. I'm sure you're right about that. Yeah.

- Rembrandt's drawings are indeed absolutely amazing. In another context, I'd love to talk about the drawings and the technique. And I agree with you that little drawing, the "Two Women Teaching a Child to Walk" is so incredible. Obviously done in a matter of a couple of minutes and everything is there. He's certainly a brilliant artist. You know, he's inexorable really. I don't find him depressing, really. I wonder if Rembrandt had strong, yes, I'm sure he had, you can see that he had strong religious belief. I think you can see that.

- You think the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Holland refers to the Dutch admiration of order in the household. You couldn't have two wives and two competing children. Maybe. That's possible. Which translation? Well, I couldn't really tell you. I mean, of course the version I read was the, you know, the old English one, the King James one, which is very beautiful, but apparently inaccurate in many ways.

Q: Could Rembrandt's fascination with Ishmael's expulsion be based on Ishmael being the father of a great nation?

A: I don't think that works, because I think the Dutch, I think the Dutch in general, they saw themselves as a chosen people. And I think that they actually identified with the Jews, not with the descendants of Ishmael. Most women until the 18th century had not learned to read and write. Possibly only some very privileged. I think Holland would've been, I think they would've been, you know, it was a very advanced country in many ways. So I think that quite a few Dutch women would've been able to read in the 17th century.

Q: Why did Rembrandt buy a house in the Jewish Quarter?

A: Well, why? I mean that your theory is as good as mine.

– He obviously felt very comfortable with Jews and he was very interested in them. And that may have been a factor. In many of Rembrandt's figures and portraits, eg. of his doctor, the arms look too short. Is this much commented on?

– I don't think, I mean Rembrandt is not always anatomically, I mean it was commented on at the time, that he was limited because he hadn't been to Italy and he hadn't learned to draw in the Italian Renaissance style. So there were people at the time who didn't think he could draw.

– Thank you for your comments. Yes. Rembrandt at house. Thank you all very, very much.

– Daniel Silva's latest novel about art forgeries. I think my sister is, I think she's reading it at the moment. She was telling me. I was introduced to Daniel Silva, I don't usually read novels, but the one I read I enjoyed very much. Reyna Vaizey gave me one to read.

– Thank you very much. Hendrik Van Loon, a very good book, I have read that is that. That's interesting, I didn't know that, that the Hebrew letters were taught to Rembrandt by Menasseh Ben Israel. The wedding ring on the right hand index finger is the, that's an interesting point and I haven't actually read that in the discussion of the meaning of that picture. Oh, I do hope Micah that you, everything in your house has survived the hurricane intact.

– Thank you. Nice comments. Well, it's, you say not many artists paint hands as well as Rembrandt. Have a look at the hands of Margaretha Trip in the National Gallery, I think it's one of the most amazing hands in history of art. Incredible. But it's painted. You say painted hands. Drawing hands is a different thing in a way. I mean, Rembrandt, that hand of Margaretha Trip, you know, the very old, thin skin stretched over the bones. It's absolutely amazing the way he conveys that. Perhaps the artists like painting children.

– So to put Ishmael in that, yeah. Rembrandt certainly liked, he like painting old people and he like painting children.

– Chiaroscuro just means light and dark, contrasting light and dark. It's Italian for light and dark.

– Wrong Miriam. Oh it's another Miriam who clearly does know about medical things though. There's a painting in Israel Museum of St. Peter using the same model as he did for Jeremiah. Yes, I'm sure he used his, he had favourite models.

- Reading the Hebrew Bible is inseparable from the Talmud commentary. I wonder, I don't know if Rembrandt knew that though. It would be interesting to know that.

- Lots of paintings had dogs in the lower foreground. Dutch, dogs can represent all sorts of things in Dutch painting. And the Dutch clearly loved them. And I was very amused at the way, you know, dogs are painted in Dutch paintings of churches often doing very naughty things, very doggy things.

- The giveaway in "The Jewish Bride" is the tradition of placing the, oh dear that got lost, wedding band on the right forefinger. Yes, thank you, that's been pointed out.

- I think, this is Sally's, she thinks Rembrandt's self-portrait in old age is his greatest. Well the one I, yeah, they are of course, great. There are 80 self-portraits of Rembrandt that have survived and they are all amazing.

- And I wonder, this is Abigail saying she wonders if the identification with Hagar is not similar to the Calvinists being ejected by mainstream Catholics. Interesting idea, I don't about that.

- How about El Greco? Yes, he's a great religious artist. He definitely is. But a bit scary, if you ask me. A bit fanatical.

- Right, that's it. Thank you very much. There's going to be another gap. I'm not talking to you till late in the month. With a new series on France and I'll still be in the area of religion, 'cause I'm going to be talking about gothic architecture in France. So thank you all very much and see you then.