Rembrandt van Rijn's *Jewish Bride*: Depicting Female Power in the Dutch Republic Through the Notion of Nation Building

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Rembrandt van Rijn’s *Jewish Bride*: Depicting Female Power in the Dutch Republic

Through the Notion of Nation Building

Nan T. Atwood

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Rembrandt van Rijn’s *Jewish Bride*: Depicting Female Power in the Dutch Republic Through the Notion of Nation Building

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Master of Arts

Many art historians have debated the identity of the couple in Rembrandt’s *Jewish Bride* (1667). The painting is most often identified as an Old Testament theme. This is due to the seventeenth-century Dutch practice of using biblical “types” as ideal models for the structuring of the new republic founded on the Israelite ideology of nation building. Three of these biblical female types that have been separately associated with the female figure in the *Jewish Bride* are, Rebecca, Ruth, and Esther. As these biblical women represented different notions of power through their respective narratives, this thesis argues that Rembrandt deliberately left the identity of the female figure ambiguous so that all three types could be referenced by viewers. Consequently, these powerful female prototypes provided significant role models for the women of the Dutch Republic as they strived to carve out similarly strong positions for themselves in this new society.

Keywords: Rembrandt, Jewish Bride, nation building, Rebecca, Ruth, Esther, female power
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Starting in the middle ages and continuing for centuries, European artists had used biblical characters to allegorize various human attributes. During the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic also used such biblical figures to define a national identity. In order to build a new nation, the Dutch formulated a culture that mirrored that of God’s chosen people, the ancient Israelites. Although the phrase “nation building” is a fairly recent term, it accurately describes the process through which the Israelites were organized and developed a form of government that allowed them some autonomy. Contemporary scholars refer to nation building in relation to The Dutch Republic as these same concepts enabled the seven provinces to form a collective identity while maintaining regional differences. Identifying their own parallel history with these biblical narratives allowed the Dutch to construct a nation building ideology. These images served as self-references to encourage moral behavior, which in turn supported their cultural, political, and economic aspirations. I suggest that Dutch viewers recognized Old Testament female figures in art as being invested with power. As female viewers identified with these biblical narratives, they

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1. It is important to note that my usage of nation does not refer to the twentieth century definition of the term. Rather, it suggests the ancient biblical usage in which it defines a community who share a common history, language, and culture. This addresses the way in which the Dutch Republic would have identified with the ancient Israelite nation. Douglas Harper. “Nation”, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=nation, retrieved 20 April 2012. See Zakheim, in which he posits that although the word "nation building" is a recent phenomenon, it accurately describes what ancient Israel did in forming a nation from diverse peoples, Dov S. Zakheim, “Ancient and Modern Nation Building: The Biblical Model for America” (paper delivered at Founding A Nation, Consulting a People: America and Judaic Perspectives, DePaul University of Law, Center for Judaic Studies, Chicago, Illinois, May 13, 2010). Also see Pardes who uses the term "nation building" to describe the process the Israelites used to build a government, Ilana Pardes. *The Biography of the Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000), chapter 14.

were enabled in their own structuring of the new republic. This thesis explores how Rembrandt van Rijn’s the *Jewish Bride*, 1663, *(Figure 1)* used stories of biblical women - specifically Rebecca, Ruth, and Esther - to model these notions of female and national power. Through overlapping and generalizing each of these biblical narratives, Rembrandt effectively portrayed an exemplary woman who embodied all the qualities the Dutch Republic identified as necessary for building a strong nation.

The subject of the *Jewish Bride* has often been linked to couples in the Old Testament. Seventeenth-century artists commonly employed biblical narratives as metaphors for contemporary figures and events. Numerous scholars have sought to explain the abundance of biblical analogies and Old Testament themes in Dutch Golden Age imagery, and academics commonly agree that biblical texts had a definitive influence on all aspects of Dutch culture, and especially on their imagery. In the 1980’s Simon Schama suggested in *The Embarrassment of Riches* that the Dutch Republic viewed themselves as a new “Israelite” nation, patterning their republic after the Israelite model. However, although Schama gave women a public presence, he failed to recognize that they wielded much power in their society.³ In the 1990’s Martha Peacock asserted that seventeenth-century Dutch females did indeed have more power than had previously been recognized, and her scholarship continues to advance this position as she suggests that this was a time when the roles of women were changing.⁴ These two aspects of Dutch culture—a desire to structure a new Israelite society and an acceptance of powerful females--converge in

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Rembrandt's painting. Thus, the Jewish Bride should be understood as a merging of these two seventeenth-century Dutch cultural characteristics. Understanding this painting as a cultural icon rather than as a specific biblical narrative may settle much of the controversy surrounding this painting.5

Rembrandt encouraged viewers in the Dutch Republic to read the painting in this way through the formal elements in his composition. Tümpel calls the Jewish Bride one of Rembrandt's most “magnificent” paintings.6 He is not alone in his opinion. After applying various theoretical approaches to this painting, scholars often resort to waxing poetic over the artist's skill at portraying such harmony, warmth, emotion, tenderness, intimacy, and love.7 It is a larger-than-life-sized three-quarter double portrait. The man is on the left and the woman stands to the right. He turns slightly towards her in an embrace, resting his left hand on her left shoulder. His right hand is placed over her heart, on top of her bodice and below her décolletage, implying the chasteness of the gesture.8 She leans into him lightly, laying her left hand on top of his, thus suggesting both agreement and unification. Her right hand falls to her side resting over her womb. The couple does not engage the viewer, but

5 Upon Rembrandt’s death an inventory of his possessions revealed this painting of a couple that had been completed in the last years of his life. The identity of the man and woman in this work is one of the most hotly debated topics among Rembrandt scholars. As was customary with seventeenth-century practices, and for indexing purposes, the painting was given the descriptive title Portrait of a Couple 16. [sic], see Christian Tümpel, “Studien zur Ikonographie der Historien Rembrandts,” (Diss. Hamburg University, Hamburg, 1968), 36-54. A copy of Tümpel’s dissertation can be found at the Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The work next appeared in a catalogue raisonné by John Smith, where it was described as A woman and her father, see John Smith, A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters, Vol. 7 (London: Smith & Son, 1834). Wilhelm Valentiner added to Smith’s catalogue in the early twentieth century. See Valentiner. It was only in the early nineteenth-century inventory of Adrian Van der Hoop that the painting was given the title Jewish Bride, see Marilyn and Irving Lanvin, The Liturgy of Love: Images from the Song of Songs in the Art of Cimabue, Michelangelo and Rembrandt (University of Kansas: Kansas, 2001), 129. Somewhere between the catalogue of Smith in 1834 and the inventory of Van der Hoop the painting had become known by this moniker.


7 Ibid. See also Svetlana Alpers, Rembrandt's Enterprise (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 84-87, Michael Bockemühl, Rembrandt, 1606-1669: The Mystery of the Revealed Form, (Köln: Tashen, 2000), 79

8 Tümpel, 2006, 272.
rather, they incline their heads towards each other, their eyes cast downward, and their gazes falling on distant points in front of them. This arrangement implies that the couple is engaged in reflective and private thoughts. Viewers infer that they are intruding on a quiet and personal moment. It may also suggest that the woman is respected, which is further evidenced by Rembrandt’s formal conventions.

The couple is finely attired in historic costumes. The man is in gold: pants, shirt, doublet and cape. He wears a black hat, oddly tilted over his long, curly, auburn hair. The woman wears an opulent red dress with a tight, gold-embroidered bodice. White pleated and ruched sleeves are visible underneath her gold tippet, or shawl. A beaded cap covers her upswept auburn hair, leaving tightly curled tendrils around the nape of her neck. She is adorned with jewels including earrings, a string of pearls around her neck, a gold necklace hanging from her shoulders, multiple bracelets on both wrists, and a ring on each hand. The painting almost glows, as the light reflected off the golden hues is intensified through Rembrandt’s use of thick impasto. Marieke de Winkle indicates that these are all indications pointing to the couple being identified as historical subjects.9

Thus, Rembrandt dressed his figures in costumes to identify them as a historical couple. His choice of apparel followed iconographic conventions and traditions of the time.10 De Winkle posits that one element of female clothing that denoted classical antiquity and the Bible was the pleated white sleeve of an undergarment. This shift was usually exposed at the neck and the sleeves. Jewelry denoted wealth and social standing. In

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10 Ibid.
a historical portrait these signifiers would specifically point to biblical royalty. The gentleman’s shimmering inflated sleeve acts as a focal point, directing the gaze toward the couple’s hands. An unidentified light source, coming from the front and left of the composition, directly illuminates the female’s face while the man’s is half in shadow. The triangular composition causes the viewer to continually make a circle from the woman’s face to the hands, to the man’s face. Deep tones of dark brown and burnt sienna mediate the background, creating an almost black frame around the figures and emphasizing the golden shimmering hues of skin and clothing. The isolation of the figures from any recognizable setting obscures any specific identification, and the focalization on the female suggests that she is the main subject of the portrait.

Although Rembrandt’s painting is often described as a man and his wife from the Old Testament, scholars have argued as to their identity. This is most likely due to the artist’s noted ambiguity in providing traditional narrative details. It is the abundant iconographic history of the Lowlands that enabled Rembrandt to combine symbolic imagery that would easily be recognizable to a conversant audience. However, on reviewing the past analysis of Schama and considering the scholarship of Peacock, this thesis explores the idea that Rembrandt’s painting reflects an overlapping of texts, combining Old Testament patriarchal couple types with a positive Dutch view of women. These textual and visual sources converge around the Dutch historical framework of building a nation, and the image of the Jewish Bride can be seen as symbolizing the powerful female. She is invested with such through her recognized contribution in creating, building, nurturing, assisting, and guiding society.

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11 Ibid, 63.
12 Svetlana Alpers, 1988, 6.
Schama suggests that the Dutch Republic’s connection with Old Testament themes and the notion of nation building was an institutionalized process. Through the portrayal of biblical couples, like the *Jewish Bride*, these cultural practices created a collective memory, and the Dutch recognized themselves as heirs of the Israelite covenant with God. Like Israel, the Dutch Republic was a product of political and religious circumstances. It became necessary not only to create a shared history, but also a fatherland. This required building the Dutch Republic from the ground up by referencing an imagined antiquity via the ancient Israelites, and an actual medieval past. Identifying with the Israelite narrative, the people of the Dutch Republic saw themselves as divinely ordained to build a nation based on the strong moral and physical character of their population. Additionally, it was a nation that recognized the contributions of women. To facilitate this they preached it from sacred and secular pulpits, teaching Dutch history to schoolchildren using the stories of the Israelites in the Old Testament.\(^{13}\) To encourage a continued Israelite identity they named their children and buildings after Old Testament characters.\(^{14}\) Furthermore, they encouraged emulation of biblical role models as examples of virtue. Often contemporary females were painted in the presence of biblical women, as well as having portraits painted in the guise of their biblical predecessors.\(^{15}\) Among the biblical women most used for this purpose were those whose narratives helped fulfill the Israelite covenant. These models mirrored the female role in the Dutch Republic.

\(^{13}\) Schama, 1987, 69-125.
\(^{14}\) Ibid, 95. The Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic populations used these names.
The three types of female power associated with the Abrahamic covenant in the Old Testament: birth, posterity, and deliverance, had the greatest cultural significance for both men and women in the Dutch Republic. A series of prints dated about 1530 by the German engraver Erhard Schön depicts important Old Testament females holding their attributes (Figures 2 and 3). When viewed alongside their attributes, Rebecca, Ruth, and Esther can be seen as personifications of the three types of power. Rebecca holds a pitcher, representing the bearing of children and denoting her power through life itself. Schama asserts that in the Dutch Republic, bearing and nurturing children was given the highest priority. Ruth is shown with a sheaf of wheat, suggesting that nourishment will ensure the continuation of posterity. Because of her allegiance to Naomi, Ruth also represents the power of familial ties, another component in fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant. Schama also notes the particularly close familial sentiments in seventeenth-century Dutch culture. Particularly common, was the proclivity to care after their elderly and extended families. Lastly Esther wears a robe and crown, signifying her role as queen and implying that she was divinely appointed to deliver her people. Peacock identifies Dutch female heroines who played an active role in liberating their provinces from sovereign rulers. These biblical types were commonly used to demonstrate women’s virtues. Through the complex layering of texts and themes it is evident that the seventeenth-century viewer would recognize all the subtleties of female power and authority in such depictions, even when their signifiers have been omitted as in the Jewish Bride.

16 These prints most often portrayed each female individually. See Bleyerveld, 2000-2001.
17 Ibid, 226.
19 Ibid, chapter 2.
20 Ibid.
The relevance of the *Jewish Bride* in seventeenth-century Dutch society as a reflection of, and a contributor to, female social power through her role in nation building may better be understood utilizing literary analysis. Using Krijn Thijs’ “narrative framework,” the Dutch Republic adopted the Old Testament narratives of the Israelites to construct their own past and address their future. This didactic format employed themes of liberation, progress, victories, suffering, and prosperity, all pointing toward a utopian future. By appropriating the Israelite narrative, the Dutch gave their history a framework, legitimacy, structure, and meaning. When Old Testament narratives are referenced, they are given specific meanings, but they overlap in theme. This allows them to have multiple meanings through a shared framework. Thus, the stories of biblical couples associated with themes of nation building became patterns for Dutch narratives and were legitimized through constant reference. This model explains how seventeenth-century Dutch society framed its history according to a set of canonical events that shared areas of common ground with the Israelites, and suggests how seventeenth-century Dutch viewers may have recognized the *Jewish Bride* as a portrayal of a powerful female as the painting is most often identified with these Old Testament types.

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22 Thijs presents a “master narrative” theory in which certain narratives have intertextual power over other narratives. He suggests that you can examine specific stories and find a shared framework through defining and describing core narrative elements. This theory functions by asking questions such as: who are the central characters of national histories? Which historical figures populate the national culture? Who are described as the enemies of the nation? How the passing of time is related to national histories? Are these national histories cyclical, or progressive? What constitutes the nation? What period does the national story follow? Which origins are used to describe the nation? An important element that has specific import in relation to the Dutch Republic is the idea that there is a “dark age” with a progress toward renewal, rebirth and eventually a “golden age”. He posits that it is through examining these concepts that one can compare the transnational aspects of historiographies. Krijn Thijs, “The Metaphor of the Master,” in *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 60-74.

23 Ibid, 71.
24 Ibid, 62-64.
25 Ibid, 74.
The concept that seventeenth-century Dutch culture may have recognized Rembrandt’s painting as a type for biblical couples is indicated in sermons delivered by Jacobus Arminius, in which he explained how the apostle Paul used “typological characters” from the Old Testament who were generalized. He then argues that the typing of Old Testament characters and narratives was intentional by biblical authors to facilitate man’s understanding of spiritual matters. Ilja Veldman argues that the usage of biblical couples to model patterns for behavior began in the late Middle Ages. The purpose was to represent scenes from Christ’s life through corresponding prophetic types. The clergy found the simplified texts useful for instruction. These texts called *biblia pauperum*, were aided by the Dutch introduction of *Bibles moraliśees*, or moralizing Bibles, and German *geschiedenis bibles*, or history Bibles. In the Dutch Republic these texts helped facilitate the secondary role of identifying themselves with the Israelite covenant. Seventeenth-century Dutch viewers were already familiar with the biblical tradition of depicting Old Testament narratives as types. It was a short leap for the Dutch viewer to recognize and appropriate Israelite struggles and promises as their own.

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*26* Jakob Harmens, also known as Jacobus Arminius was a sixteenth-century theologian whose writings were the foundation of the Remonstrant movement. The Arminian protestant sect formed after his death. Arminius broke from mainstream Calvinism over the view of predestination, with which he disagreed. He argued for humanism, the notion of free will, and religious tolerance within the church. Arminius’ objections surfaced late in his life and career. See William van Doodewaard, “Remonstrants, Contra-Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619): The Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic” “About and Around Rembrandt: Special Issue of The Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies: Commemoration of the 400th Birthday of Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn” (2007): 147-149.


*29* These illustrated bibles appear as early as the 9th century in the form of illuminated manuscripts. The term *biblia pauperum* did not appear until the 15th century. For further discussion see *The Catholic dictionary*, 1957.

In addition to these illustrated Bibles, the Dutch culture was introduced to Italian *Concordia* texts in the fifteenth century. The *Concordia* were moralizing books that illustrated proper behavior based on the Ten Commandments. Veldman suggests that when these books were introduced into Dutch visual culture there was a gradual secularization of the themes throughout the fifteenth century. This was done by eliminating any reference to specific characters and by eventually replacing them with profane representations of types, as seen in depictions of married love (*Figure 4*), where all references to biblical types are absent. During the Reformation the tradition of using Old Testament figures as types became popular again.\(^3\) By the beginning of the seventeenth century both biblical types and profane images permeated Dutch culture. This heterogeneous mixture of sacred and secular themes facilitated the cultural proclivity for mixing the two with seemingly little difficulty. This suggests that the *Jewish Bride* was not only viewed as an overlapping of biblical types, but also a mixture of marriage themes.

A popular engraving depicting this sacred/secular theme of marriage provides the first indication that seventeenth-century viewers would recognize *The Jewish Bride* as a type for marriage that invests the woman with equality in her role. The typography is based on what connotes an exemplary wedded couple. In this representation, the ideal spouses are portrayed as equal partners, thus suggesting female power in the relationship. In the engraving *The True Marriage* (*Figure 5*), both the man and the woman cast their eyes down but not toward the viewer. Veldman posits that their gaze references their contemplation of their vows.\(^3\) This illustration was a companion to two other prints,

\(^3\) Ibid.

Marriage Based on Lust, (Figure 6), and Marriage Based on Avarice and Luxury, (Figure 7). These accompanying illustrations depict non-ideal types of marriage. In Lust the man looks at the woman as she avoids his gaze. In Avarice the woman looks directly at the man as he looks at her wealth suggested by her clothing and jewelry. The direction of the gazes in the later two images would appear to indicate that one gender has an advantage over the other. However, in The True Marriage each partner avoids the other’s gaze, possibly suggesting that they are entering marriage on equal footing, and with equal regard for one another. This arrangement is similar to the gazes of the figures in the Jewish Bride suggesting that the painting would be associated with the portrayal of what constitutes a true, or equal marriage. Thus, the gazes help identify the woman as having power in both her marriage as well as her nation. By generalizing the couple Rembrandt also encourages the seventeenth-century viewer to identify the couple with portraiture.

Rembrandt’s painting is also in the manner of a fashionable double portrait that was used to represent the husband and wife relationship in both public and private settings. It was popular in Dutch painting for couples to be portrayed in the guise of Old Testament pairs. Painted in this manner, seventeenth-century Dutch marriage portraiture was intended to illustrate the couple’s relationship with one another, as well as to reflect accepted cultural identities. Ann Jensen Adams suggests that images were thus presented in such a way that the viewer would both admire and imitate a model life. Seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture helped form conceptions of self and personal identity.  

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33 Ibid, 117.
case of couple portraiture these identities reflected the social ideal of nation building as it pertains to Old Testament biblical narratives.

David Smith asserts that it is generally assumed that in seventeenth-century double portraiture the woman’s inclusion was ancillary. Dutch portraiture often depicts wives as performing supporting roles in the family business, thereby suggesting that their power was limited in the public sphere.\(^{35}\) This can be seen in Rembrandt’s *The Shipbuilder and his Wife, 1633*, (Figure 8), which portrays Jan Rijcksen and his wife Griet Jans. The painting reflects the seventeenth-century debate in Dutch society over the struggle to reconcile the various roles women fulfilled, with resulting contradictory portrayals. *The Shipbuilder and His Wife*, commissioned by Rijcksen, may express the husband’s desire or willingness to give his wife equal physical presence in their portrait, implying both a supporting role in her husband’s business and also equal power in their home. Double portraits like these would usually be hung in a couple’s home to declare the wife’s contribution to the family business.\(^{36}\) In this instance Griet’s physical presence balances that of her husband’s as they share equal space. Her arm reaches across the front of his body, clearly placing her in front of her husband. Light coming from the window illuminates her face, counterbalancing Jan’s ruddy complexion. His image is also slightly off-center in the composition. These conventions allow Griet’s physical presence to command as much attention as that of her husband’s, suggesting that she did indeed contribute in an equal way through her domestic duties.

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\(^{35}\) David Smith, “Early Double Dutch Portraits and the Dutch Conversation Piece”, *The Art Bulletin* 64 (June, 1982), 275. Smith suggests that the relationship depicted can be understood by looking at Jacob Cats *Houwelyck*. In one passage Cats tells women that they should not have a role in church or state, clearly making distinctions between public and private spheres. However, Smith notes that Cats’ intent was not meant to demean the contributions of women, rather, he wanted to emphasize the importance of the stability of the home and women’s power in it.

It has often been proposed that the extent of the seventeenth-century Dutch woman’s power was tied to her legal standing and was centered on her domestic responsibilities. Much scholarship has been devoted to investigating the female’s participation in both home and business and her significance to the welfare of the family unit. However, it was also noted that women’s rights were not simply relegated to business matters and family prosperity. They also received protection under the law, which signified they were recognized as possessing autonomy. Compared with their European counterparts, Dutch women enjoyed more legal rights and privileges. The Dutch Republic’s legal system was structurally influenced by the ideology and theology of the Reformation. The main tenets being questioned and debated during this time included the nature of man (and woman) as it is revealed in the scriptures. This effectuated a closer reading of the Bible, which in turn created the opportunity for further questioning previously held notions of female roles. Under this sacred/secular umbrella, citizens were

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37 Many financial legal rights regarding business transactions were given to women whose husbands worked for the VOC, in order to run family owned trades. As their husbands were often away at sea, wives needed authority to act on behalf of the family business. Women were also part of large mercantile families that gave them access to trading networks and most importantly guilds. Women were afforded the right to act independently and to trade on different levels and in diverse markets with little restriction. By the seventeenth century Dutch women were given full authority to manage all affairs regarding their trade. Danielle van den Heuvel, “Women and Work in the Early Modern Netherlands: Women’s Work In Trade,” paper given at the Fifth European Social Science History Conference (Berlin 2004) [http://www.iisg.nl/research/womenswork.html](http://www.iisg.nl/research/womenswork.html) (accessed July 12, 2011).


40 The political upheaval came to a head in the early 1600’s when Reformed Calvinist theology was questioned through Erasman ideas. The very nature of the Reformation encouraged dissenting thought and fostered personal exploration of the Bible. It is suggested that this inquisitive nature even filtered into Roman Catholic thought in the Dutch Republic, thus creating a relatively liberal view of women. This was evidenced in the wording of *The Remonstrants*, which is genderless and equalizing. See Doodewaard, 2007, 147-149.
encouraged to look to the biblical past to discover a historical basis for gender roles.\footnote{Ibid, 65. Citing Johannes Uytenboert, seventeenth-century historian Erasmus is credited with the inauguration of the initial Reformation. Uytenboert’s Kerckelijke Historie places the Remonstrants within the Protestant tradition of interpreting directly from biblical texts.} Therefore, rather than an adherence to the patriarchal dogma of the medieval church, the Dutch looked to the Bible to interpret women’s place in home and society.\footnote{Ibid.} Closer readings of the Old Testament texts, specifically the narratives of Rebecca, Ruth, and Esther identified these women as worthy of consideration in these matters. Considering these seventeenth-century Dutch social practices suggests how the Jewish Bride could be seen as a complex portrayal of many textual and iconographical ideas, while still allowing viewers to comprehend its nuanced meanings associated with power. However, images depicting female power were not always portrayed as a flattering attribute.

It needs to be noted that there are an abundance of contradictory images depicting women produced during the Dutch Golden Age. This attests to the fact that the female role was not clearly defined in the seventeenth century. Completely incompatible representations of females co-existed side by side. Paintings of Venus, the Virgin Mary, genre scenes, and family portraits often shared wall space in a Dutch home.\footnote{Derek Muizelaur, et al., Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age: Paintings and People in Historical Perspective (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). The authors show through family inventories that Venus and Mars was a popular mythological subject in the Dutch Republic and that a third of wealthy homes owned a copy of this theme. These images were hung alongside both secular and religious images suggesting that the owners did not have any issue with the seemingly contrasting female depictions. The authors suggest that viewers were aware of the erotic content of the mythological themes and there was not a cultural taboo against hanging sexualized female images in private homes. Additionally, genre paintings and portraits were presented alongside these other themes apparently successfully mixing secular, sacred, and personal subject matter.} These disparate portrayals of women suggest that seventeenth-century viewers accepted these seemingly contradictory depictions of female roles. These images infer that women had little or no power, and that they also wielded a great deal of power within the marriage
relationship and in society. Negative depictions of female domestic power can be seen in genre paintings similar to Jan Molenaer’s *The Sense of Touch*, 1663 (Figure 9). These images suggest the fate of a husband whose wife wields too much power in her home.

Previous scholarship suggested that opposing images infer that the “idea” of female power was troubling but her actual power was necessary in practice, as it was defined through domestic responsibilities. However, Peacock contends that this view is muddled when we fail to contextualize the images in their time and place. This incongruence results in discussing stereotypes of female power rather than portrayals of actual power.

It is difficult to argue that the *Jewish Bride* depicts the woman as a mere visual accessory. It is through Rembrandt’s compositional and formal inventions that the woman may be identified as the central figure. This is noted by how the artist draws the viewer’s eye continually to the female. He does so by positioning the man’s arm as an indicator pointing to her breast. Except for the woman’s red dress, the painting is a monochromatic blending of browns and golds. The visual space that the scarlet skirt fills in the composition distinguishes her presence, as the color itself denotes power. These things together designate her as the focal point of the painting. Thus, the *Jewish Bride* refuses to become a mere indication of a supporting female in a male narrative. This is a further indication that Rembrandt’s portrayal of the woman in his painting suggests that in this society she has a greater identity of power, which comes from her domestic and social contributions.

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44 For scholarship that suggests depictions of women showed they had little or no power see; Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Adams, 2009. For scholarship that acknowledges that these depictions may indicate some power see; Schama, 1980 and Smith, 1982. For scholarship that identifies women as wielding a great deal of power see Peacock, 1994.


46 Peacock, 2003, 55-56.
Peacock asserts that when analyzing portrayals of women attending to responsibilities in their homes there was an elevated status given to domestic duties.\(^{47}\) She notes that the home played particular importance in Dutch society and the female’s role in its prosperity was neither demeaned, nor were domestic tasks regarded as menial.\(^{48}\) In order to assess the power that wives had in these portrayals necessitates looking at it in light of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. The composition of the couple, inferring intimacy, was a popular model for formal portraits depicting marriage in the Dutch Republic. The woman’s presence can be seen as a statement of her power within the public and the private relationship through her identification with cultural role models.\(^ {49}\) These responsibilities revolved around notions of female and national power via Old Testament women who embodied all the qualities the Dutch Republic identified as necessary for building a strong nation.\(^ {50}\)

The themes of nation building previously referred to; birth, posterity, and deliverance are connected with biblical couple types who are most commonly identified with the *Jewish Bride* namely; Rebecca, Ruth, and Esther. Birth is the act of bringing forth offspring and it is the primary component of providing a nation with inhabitants. Birth is

\(^{47}\) Peacock analyzes images of domestic space and how they reflected a sense of pride for women. Ibid, 2003, 52-54.

\(^{48}\) Ibid, 51-52.


\(^{50}\) The Dutch mentality of nation building arises from their collective socio-cultural distinction as a “gathered Jerusalem”. Their identification with Israel specifically creates a narrative that needs divine deliverance. In this instance the Dutch use the story of Esther the Queen to embody their salvation, see Schama, 1987, 51-52. To understand the role women play toward nation building in post conflict societies see Benard. This contemporary study finds that there are multiple factors that predict a nation’s success. Among the things the study found are that the status of women in a society is an active agent in bringing about a more peaceful, prosperous and stable economy; the health of women, both physically and mentally, directly impacts the well being of children; and the state of children’s health and education is one of the most important indicators of its strength. The study also found that women’s participation in the earliest stages of economic development have multiple benefits. Another important indicator of a nations stability and success is recognizing that traditional responsibilities in the home and the women who fill them are vital to economic growth, educational goals and fostering healthy children. Cheryl Benard, *The Role of Women in Nation Building* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2008).
also the means through which the other two processes can be actuated. Posterity results from birth, and is the only way through which a nation can continue to grow. A nation will literally be built through its posterity. Deliverance is the act of being set free, or being rescued. It was a necessary component in biblical nation building as the Israelites’ survival relied on the providence and will of God.51 To the Dutch it was just as vital to the building of their own nation.52 Each of these elements is fundamental to the aims of nation building, and requires individual attention and affirmation. It is recognized that both man and woman are vital to birth and posterity, but the female is not always recognized as a vehicle for deliverance. However, the Old Testament narratives give to the woman the capacity for all three components of nation building in her role as a help-meet to her husband. Rembrandt’s painting reflects the power that the female has in the marriage partnership through these life-sustaining contributions.

The identification of the couple in Rembrandt’s painting is often placed into four overlapping categories: genre, portraiture, allegory, and Old Testament themes. Research suggests that Old Testament identifications predominate. The painting has been associated with almost every husband and wife from the Old Testament, as well as from the Apocrypha. Rembrandt’s painting is now designated by the Rijksmuseum as Two Figures from the Old Testament, known as the Jewish Bride. Its present title reflects the preponderance of scholarly attributions to a biblical couple. However, the historical title the Jewish Bride is still the most readily recognized.

52 See Benard, 2008.
Christian Tümpel made the most recent identification of the subjects as Isaac and Rebecca.\textsuperscript{53} He bases his argument on earlier scholarship, and supports it with a new interpretation. It appears that the art historian, John Valentiner, first identified the subject of the painting as Isaac and Rebecca in 1905 based on traditional depictions of that couple, beginning in the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{54} This argument suggests that artists looked to Raphael’s painting, \textit{Isaac and Rebecca Spied upon by Abimelech}, 1518-1519, as a model for portraying the subject matter (\textbf{Figure 10}).\textsuperscript{55} Tümpel supports Valentiner’s identification via Rembrandt’s drawing supposedly depicting Isaac and Rebecca in the garden spied upon by Abimelech (\textbf{Figure 11}). He suggests that this was a preliminary sketch for the painting.\textsuperscript{56} It is evident that the pose of the couple in the drawing is very similar to the one in the painting. There is also an indication in both the \textit{Jewish Bride} and the drawing to a fenced “garden of love”, which was a common iconographical reference to the setting of this particular scene.\textsuperscript{57} In both the painting and the drawing the garden has been reduced to a bush in the upper right corner of the image. Tümpel further supports his argument with the aid of an x-ray image of the painting (\textbf{Figure 12}) that shows the cartoon underneath the painting. However, it is difficult to conclude from the cartoon that Rembrandt had initially intended the painting to include a more detailed reference to a garden of love.\textsuperscript{58} Tümpel


\textsuperscript{54} Valentiner first suggested that \textit{The Jewish Bride} portrays Rembrandt’s son Titus and his wife Magdalena in a historical composition. He then identified the different biblical couples that have similar iconography, and are portrayed in similar compositions. For Valentine’s arguments see Tümpel’s 1968 Dissertation pages 39-42, sections 15, 19, 25, 26.

\textsuperscript{55} Christian Tümpel, \textit{Rembrandt} (Harry N. Abrams: New York, 1993). He bases his argument on the fact that the figures in the under-painting are very similar to those in a sketch titled by the artist, entitled \textit{Isaac and Rebecca Overheard by Abimelech}, date unknown.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. A garden of love was a common motif used to reference love between a man and a woman and therefore in my opinion it is not conclusive that Rembrandt used it to specifically denote this biblical scene, rather, he may have used it to indicate the general idea of love.
argues, as others have previously, that the artist intentionally reduced narrative detail, sometimes completely transforming his subjects.\textsuperscript{59} Svetlana Alpers suggests that Rembrandt purposefully created an ambiguous subject matter in order to allow the viewer to see multiple layered references to universal themes, rather than singular subjects.\textsuperscript{60} In support of this argument there are compositional elements that are consistent with the historical portrayals of the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca (Figure 13), and this tradition continued through the nineteenth century (Figure 14).

The representation of Rebecca denotes female power through her ability to give life. The birth process fulfills the Abrahamic covenant.\textsuperscript{61} The lives of the patriarchs are the stories through which these narratives are revealed. It is important to note that the major elements of all biblical patriarchal narratives revolve around their wives and the process of birth. Contemporary feminist theory addresses the process of birth in biblical narratives in two ways; the first associates it with the female goddess theory, or maternity equals power.\textsuperscript{62} The second is that mothers, as bearers of children, exist to serve the interests of a patriarchal system of power.\textsuperscript{63} However, Rachel Havrelock proposes a third argument in that rather than concentrating on the end result, one should look to the means as the signifier of power.\textsuperscript{64} Rebecca is not just the vehicle through which children are born. She is a significant maternal figure, nurturing, instructing, and ultimately influencing her children.

\textsuperscript{59} Christian Tümpel, 2006, 272.
\textsuperscript{60} Alpers, 1988, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{61} See Genesis chapter 17.
\textsuperscript{63} See Fuchs, 2000.
Her significance in these roles is evidenced in the painting through the gestures of the hands.

Rembrandt is noted as paying particular importance to his subject’s hands, and Alpers suggests that they are the key to understanding his paintings. By enlarging the hands, by illuminating them, and by centering them in his compositions, Rembrandt effectively highlights their significance.65 There is a long cultural preoccupation with hand gestures throughout western Europe, resulting in the publication of sixteenth-century books describing different gestures and their meanings.66 Therefore, the iconography of these hand gestures was readily recognizable, and it informed all aspects of seventeenth-century visual culture.67 Alpers suggests that it is Rembrandt’s hands that tell the story and impart the significance of the scene.68 Hand gestures conveyed symbolic references since antiquity and they reached a height of didactic import during the Dutch Golden Age.69 Hands also appear to be an important element in expressing emotional states in Rembrandt's work.70 This may be significant in biblical types denoting the mother of the Abrahamic Covenant as a mother's heart is associated with Marian iconology and familial love.71 Building on this theme, a hand placed over Mary's breast indicates that she is the vessel chosen to preserve God’s people, as referenced in Hendrick Goltzius’ *The Annunciation*, 1594 (Figure 15).72 Similar to the *Jewish Bride*, her other hand is often placed

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65 Alpers, 1988, 24.
67 Ibid.
68 Alpers, 1988, 25.
72 Ibid.
over her womb to stress her fecundity. These gestures specifically correlate to the virtues and attributes associated with Rebecca.

Thus the gestures and placements of the four hands in Rembrandt’s painting would be understood in seventeenth-century Dutch culture as having specific connotations. When the Jewish Bride is divided into quadrants, the man’s hand, firmly placed over the woman’s heart, is almost directly centered in the composition. Her hand, slightly to the right and below, lightly reinforces his gesture. The viewer’s eyes are drawn to the hands by the man’s golden sleeve (Figure 16). The intensely highlighted arm acts as an index, indicating the most significant element of the composition. Even as other aspects of specific narratives have been edited out, the prominence of the hands insists that they are the unifying theme.

The placement of the hands on the woman’s breast is the focal point of Rembrandt’s painting and suggests that it be considered as a significant indication of the woman’s power. The depictions of the female breast have a long iconographic, allegorical and symbolic history in art. Although Rembrandt may not have had a twentieth-century feminist agenda when painting the Jewish Bride, it may have been recognized as a consensus-building indication of women’s contribution to Dutch society. In historical artistic practices the bare breast was often used to visualize themes of plenty, liberty, and emancipation. However, it is evident that in the Jewish Bride the breast is not bare, it is

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73 Lavin and Lavin, 2001, 94-95. The authors posit that this gesture was recognized from antiquity in which the hand over the groin references the dual aspects of Venus, her chastity and fecundity.

74 Mary Sheriff discusses the breast as a sign of plenty in her investigation of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun’s Peace Bringing Back Liberty, see Mary Sheriff, The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun and the Cultural Politics of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 76-78. The exposed breast as a sign of liberty has its origins in the ancient Greek myth of the amazons, in which they were reported to have amputated their right breast in order to better equip them to draw their bow and arrow, see William Blake Tyrell, Amazons (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984): xii. For an interesting discussion on the breast as a sign of emancipation see, James Smalls “”Race,” Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s Portrait d’une nègres (1800), Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide, 3 (2004).
fully covered. Griselda Pollock notes that by covering the breast (in a pose similar with the Venus Pudica), the gesture draws more attention to breast as a sign, rather than exposing it.\textsuperscript{75} The image then is freed of overt signs of sexuality. The respect and sentiment with which Rembrandt treats his female subject is conveyed through the man’s hand lightly placed first over her heart and the woman’s laid on top of his in recognition of his affirmation. It is in this manner that the reference of the woman’s breast as a signifier of power is emphasized. Through this symbolism the woman in Rembrandt’s painting may then be recognized by the seventeenth-century Dutch viewer as representing the themes of power associated with Rebecca. As the painting is a portrait of a couple it is also important to note that Isaac and Rebecca were used as types to signify a pattern for marriage.\textsuperscript{76} When scholars comment on the \textit{Jewish Bride} they often note that Rembrandt’s treatment of the gesture infers love.\textsuperscript{77} The man leans toward the woman embracing her with his left hand (See fig. 1). He lays his right hand, the hand used to make pledges, on her breast indicating that the central character of the image is the female. Her hand gently rests on his to affirm the avowal that he has made. Clearly the hands suggest the importance of the woman in the \textit{Jewish Bride} as a woman who is loved and respected, thus inferring she has power in her marriage.

The argument that Rebecca, or any other wife, is only an addendum to the male history of the Old Testament ignores the power expressed through her narrative.\textsuperscript{78} Although Rebecca’s part in the couple’s narrative is small in comparison to the whole, there

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Lanvin and Lanvin, 2001, 86.
\item Simon Schama \textit{Rembrandt’s Eyes} (New York: Alfred A. Knof, 1999), 663.
\item See Fuchs, 2000. Fuchs argues that the female role is marginalized in the Genesis narrative through the proportion of text given to her story.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
are clear indications that she has power within her marital relationship as well as independently. A closer examination of the biblical text by seventeenth-century Dutch readers may identify this as an important source of her power. Initially, Isaac prayed on the couple’s behalf that Rebecca would conceive, and God answered Isaac’s plea on behalf of Rebecca, thus suggesting the co-operation of both husband and wife. After Rebecca conceives she becomes worried that there is a “struggle” in her womb. Rebecca asks God why this is happening.\(^{79}\) The indication that Rebecca has power beyond her role as a partner to Isaac comes when God answers her prayer directly, indicating that she is deemed worthy to receive instruction without patriarchal intervention. God’s answer also indicates that it is Rebecca who will direct the course of the nation through her son, and not Isaac.\(^{80}\)

God confers the literal bestowal of the Abrahamic covenant on her when he visits her in answer to her prayer.\(^{81}\) This indicates that God identified Rebecca as worthy of recognition outside of her biological prescription of power. She has now been divinely appointed to direct the course of the Israelite nation. In another instance, acting on the promise concerning Esau and Jacob, she intentionally misleads Isaac into giving the father’s blessing to the younger son. In this instance she was not just the vehicle through which two nations would stem.\(^{82}\) If traditional patriarchal narrative had driven this story, Isaac’s prayer would have been answered with one heir. Instead twins were born, and tradition directed that the eldest son would be the natural heir. God, however, directs that the

\(^{79}\) The Rebecca narrative is found in Genesis (KJV) chapter 25.
\(^{80}\) Ibid.
\(^{81}\) Ibid, v. 23.
\(^{82}\) Since twins were born this directed that the eldest son would be the natural heir. God, however, directs that the second son receive the Abrahamic covenant. It is Rebecca, not Isaac, who is instructed to ensure that Jacob receives the father’s blessing. Ibid.
second son is to receive the Abrahamic covenant. It is Rebecca, not Isaac, who is instructed to ensure which son receives his father’s blessing. In this instance it is the female who guarantees the future direction of the nation, and she holds the absolute source of power. Rebecca’s narrative can be understood as having particular importance to seventeenth-century Dutch women. Visual culture, combined with social practices, informed their power to direct the path of their nation through bearing children and raising a righteous generation. However compelling this evidence may seem, scholarship has also suggested that the depiction of the couple in *The Jewish Bride* is most closely associated with that of another Old Testament pair, Ruth and Boaz.83

Ruth as a type is important to the Dutch Republic’s analogous alignment with the Israelites as she is named as one of the four female matriarchs in the genealogy of Christ.84 As such, her power is realized through the continuation of posterity. Ruth has special significance to the Israelite ideology of the Dutch Republic, as she is not a literal descendant of the Abrahamic covenant. Ruth is awarded a place in the royal lineage through her righteousness and via her marriage to Boaz.85 Ruth’s symbol of the sheaf of wheat may have had multiple meanings to seventeenth-century Dutch viewers.86 First it signifies that Ruth is a working woman. Because of the death of her husband, she has been left alone to support herself. This would resonate with the Dutch seafaring culture in which many women were left to run their homes and businesses alone while their husbands were away,

83 Tümpel, 1968.
84 See *The Book of Ruth* (KJV).
85 Bleyerveld, 226.
86 Ruth’s Jewish Iconography prefigures the Christian. Her earliest depictions in illuminated manuscripts appear in early Byzantine Octateuchs, which contain the first eight books of the Old Testament ending with *The Book of Ruth*. Her story was anciently recited during the Pentacost, or the Feast of the Harvest, which naturally lends itself to Ruth holding the literal depiction of the harvest. Sarit Shalev-Eyni, “In the Days of the Barley Harvest: The Iconography of Ruth”, *Artibus et Historiae* 26 (2005): 37-57.
and sometimes lost, at sea. The sheaf of wheat may also remind seventeenth-century Dutch viewers of their prosperity as a society, and the precarious nature of fortunes. In the sixteenth-century engraving by Jan II Collaert (Figure 17), Ruth is portrayed as an exemplary woman because she was noted as having acquired eternal glory through her hard work.87

Carl von Lemcke, the German poet, songwriter, art historian, and aesthetician, first identified the subject of the painting as Ruth and Boaz between 1878 and 1884.88 He describes the scene as referencing Ruth 2:11, “Ruth lagert bei Boas”, which translates as Ruth stays near Boaz. The scripture tells how Ruth found favor with Boaz because of her loyalty to her mother-in-law and her hard work. The most common depictions of Ruth and Boaz depict the narrative when they meet in the fields or a salacious image where she offers herself in exchange for food (Figure 18).89 The identity of the subject in the Jewish Bride as Ruth and Boaz is often rejected because there are more representations of this second erotic type, and this seems incongruous with the overall mood of Rembrandt’s painting.90 However, the artist extensively made drawings depicting less common portrayals of biblical narratives.91 The pupils in his studio would have copied these drawings.92 Gerbrand van den Eeckhout’s painting of Ruth and Boaz, 1655 (Figure 19), may have been inspired by his teacher Rembrandt, and could explain why the Jewish Bride might be recognized as this biblical couple.

87 Bleyerveld, 229.
88 Ibid, 37.
89 Lanvin and Lanvin, 2001, 86.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid, 7.
92 Ibid.
Literal interpretation of *The Book of Ruth* explicitly states that it was Ruth who offered herself in marriage to Boaz. As she had previously been told that she could continue to glean the fields, there was no need for her to marry for support. It is clear that marriage was not necessary for her survival; rather she chose to marry in order to have a son, indicating her confidence in proposing this arrangement. The importance of Ruth’s narrative lies in its overall theme of the continuity of posterity. It was through the lineage of Ruth and Boaz that David, and eventually Christ, would be born. It is the significance of this event that may be further associated with the hands.

Rembrandt may be following another traditional hand gesture found in depictions of Flora ([Figure 20](#)). In his painting of the subject the artist used his own wife Saskia as the model. Here the placement of the hand indicates that Flora’s elevation to being goddess of flowers brings spring to the world. The connotation of the coming of the savior with rebirth symbolized by spring has been in use since antiquity. The hand also appears to play an important role in Eeckhout’s portrayal. Boaz’ hand reaching for Ruth would signify that he has placed special significance on her. Although standing at some distance from each other, the pair is similarly positioned, and their gazes are directed in comparable directions to the *Jewish Bride*. In his painting Eeckhout includes the specific iconography of the woman’s apron filled with wheat to identify her as Ruth. However, Rembrandt reduces his painting to the themes of Ruth, which has multiple nuanced similarities with which the Dutch Republic could identify. Ruth embodies an independent, industrious, problem-solver.

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Her story describes more than her character and she becomes more than just a symbol of a virtuous woman.

Like other biblical women, Ruth has been depicted as possessing both virtue and vice. In Dutch culture, Ruth was also associated with the “maid-of-all-work”. Beginning around the fifteenth century, kitchen maids and milkmaids were depicted as the embodiment of low moral character, predisposed to promiscuity, laziness, and thieving. However, during the seventeenth century the Dutch maid began to be associated with the alternate view of female virtue, together with her base character. Her high, as opposed to her low depiction, was associated with Ruth, as an exemplar of domestic virtue.

It has been argued that Rembrandt’s painting depicts Ruth and Boaz as she offers herself to him in exchange for food; however, it is difficult to view Ruth as a victim of male lust, as in the biblical text Boaz tells her she can continue to glean his fields without any sexual reciprocity. It has even been suggested that the narrative of Ruth and Boaz is a critique on the treatment of women. Rather than portraying the female as a victim, the Ruth narrative instructs the male to treat women generously and respectfully. As the Reformation insisted on a direct reading of the text, it is probable that seventeenth-century

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97 Schama argues that maids were seen as having a dichotomous nature. One side being lazy, and promiscuous, the other being virtuous. Her outcome was determined by her mistress’ direction and her opportunity of finding a good marriage. Schama suggests that household maids were not as reviled as their images seemed to depict. Rather, they were humble girls courted by respectable gentlemen. Ruth was often associated with servants through her relationship with Naomi as caretaker, as well as her place as a gleaner in Boaz’s fields, see Athalya Brenner ed., *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 158-161.
98 Even Fuchs agrees that Ruth was not the victim of male lust. See Fuchs, 2000, 117.
Dutch readers recognized this same interpretation. Dutch readers recognized this same interpretation.101 Ruth personified the manifestation of power in nation building. She pursued the marriage arrangement that would ensure a continuation of posterity.

Birth and posterity would become irrelevant without the end result of deliverance. Esther, one of the strongest female characters in the Bible, used her position as queen to King Ahasuerus to save her people. At great personal peril, Queen Esther divulged her Jewish descent, and requested a reversal of the decree to kill all the Jews. Esther’s moral strength is a model of leadership, courage, and heroism. German art historian Max Jordan was the first to identify the subject as Esther and Ahasuerus, which he did in 1884. His argument was initially based on their costly clothing. Jordan argues that only a royal couple would be portrayed in a historical painting wearing such fine apparel and jewels.102

In the Old Testament narrative, the first indication that Esther has power is when Mordecai tells her that it is her destiny, decreed by God, to save her people.103 Esther’s narrative examines the capacity and capability of the female to possess intelligence and understand complex socio-political issues while at the same time maintaining a dignified presence. When applied to the Dutch Republic’s notion of nation building, Esther can be recognized as an apt example of power. Her narrative encourages women to rely on their intellect and wisdom, which then brings about the blessings promised to the covenant people.104 However, it was her character that would have caused seventeenth-century Dutch viewers to adopt her as a role model as they established the Dutch Republic. It would

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101 Els Stronks argues that the Reformers insisted that the word took precedence over interpretation and this applied to images. He posits that Protestants developed a preference for illustrating biblical scenes according to a strict interpretation of the scriptures. See Stronks, 2010, 229.
102 As cited in Tümpel, 1968, 37.
103 See The Book of Esther (KJV), chapter 4.
104 Schama, 1997, 404.
not be difficult to associate the woman in the *Jewish Bride* with Queen Esther. The woman in the painting is very similar to Esther as she is portrayed in Rembrandt’s work executed during the same period, that of *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther*, 1660 (Figure 21).

Tümpel acknowledges Jordan’s identification by noting similarities between this work and the *Jewish Bride*. He suggests that it is the color tonalities of the two paintings that are most strikingly similar, but it is also the richness of the costumes, the addition of sumptuous jewels, and the treatment of the light focused on the female.\(^{105}\) The climactic moment depicted in *The Feast of Esther* occurs right before Ahasuerus makes his judgment against Haman.\(^ {106}\) However Tümpel suggests that the similarities between *The Feast of Esther* and the *Jewish Bride* is in the narrative depicted. They both illustrate the moment after the king’s decision, in which he chooses Esther to be his queen.\(^ {107}\) It is again suggested that Rembrandt removed common details from his painting in such a way as to make these multiple readings possible.

There is another argument that shows the ambiguous nature of the *Jewish Bride* as it relates to the narrative of Esther. According to Tümpel, previous scholarship identified the figures in the *Jewish Bride* as depicting Mordecai asking Esther to intervene with King Ahasuerus in order to save the Jews.\(^ {108}\) The couple was often used in seventeenth-century Dutch literature to allegorize the righteous Dutch citizens fighting against the oppressive Spanish King, who was depicted as Haman.\(^ {109}\) Pieter Lastman, Rembrandt’s teacher,

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\(^{105}\) Tümpel, 2006, 270. See also Alpers, 1988, 7.
\(^{106}\) Ibid, 354.
\(^{107}\) Ibid, 355.
\(^{108}\) Ibid. See also Tümpel, 1963.
painted multiple scenes of Esther’s narrative including *Esther and Haman Before Ahasuerus*, 1639 (Figure 22), and *Haman Pleads to Esther for Mercy*, 1618 (Figure 23). Steven Nadler suggests Rembrandt drew inspiration for his subject of the *Jewish Bride* from Lastman’s paintings.\(^{110}\) However, the comparison, while similar, is not convincing. Instead it is the pictorial tradition that evolved after Rembrandt’s painting of the *Jewish Bride*, which suggests that viewers should identify its female subject as Esther. Once more, the hands play an important role in attributing the subject to Esther as part of an Old Testament couple.

In *Esther and Mordecai*, 1685 (Figure 24) by Arent de Gelder, one of Rembrandt’s last students, the female’s hand gesture is similar to that in Rembrandt’s painting.\(^{111}\) However, the hands in the *Jewish Bride* have noted similarities with many paintings that had religious overtones. This hand gesture can be seen in Rembrandt’s portrait *Johannes Wtenbogaert*, 1633 (Figure 25). In this instance the hand over the heart indicates faith. Dutch preachers and pious merchants often commissioned portraits depicting themselves in this manner.\(^{112}\) As mentioned previously, there were illustrated books that described what specific hand gestures meant. According to a 1654 illustrated English volume of gestures, the placement of the hand on the breast signifies faith, swearing to God, and witnessing to a truth.\(^{113}\) In the *Jewish Bride* both the man and the woman make the hand gesture, but she is indicated as the recipient of the oath, inferring the woman receives power via the man’s acknowledgment of such, and also through self-recognition. In Esther’s

\(^{110}\) Ibid.
\(^{111}\) Ibid, 101-102.
\(^{112}\) Shelly Perlove, *Rembrandt’s Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009), 34.
\(^{113}\) Lanvin, 92.
case two things are being witnessed; she is ordained by God to save her people, and Ahasuerus has chosen her as his queen.

This identification is further supported as Rembrandt dressed his figures in costumes to identify them as a historical royal couple. His choice of apparel followed iconographic conventions and traditions of the time.\textsuperscript{114} Referred to earlier, one element of female clothing that denoted classical antiquity and the Bible was the pleated white sleeve of an undergarment exposed at the neck and the sleeves.\textsuperscript{115} Her jewelry denoted wealth and social standing. In a historical portrait these signifiers would specifically point to biblical royalty, and specifically Esther.\textsuperscript{116} Together with Rembrandt’s proclivity for eliminating all specific identifying details, it is evident that seventeenth-century viewers could recognize the woman depicted as a queen, even without a crown and robe. However, the narrative of Esther has multiple overlapping meanings and she has power even before she is made queen.

Esther was identified in seventeenth-century Dutch culture as a heroine. Peacock points out that many Dutch women fought during the struggles for independence against Spain. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, national heroines arose, such as Kenau Simons Hasselaer and Trijn van Leemput, who were held up as positive role models, described as being braver than any man.\textsuperscript{117} Art and literature exalted these women and their fellow female soldiers as brave, heroic, and strong, while still embodying femininity,

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 63.
as it was understood during the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{118} Besides courage, loyalty, and patriotism, Esther is further associated with deliverance, which is evidenced in a Dutch celebration associated with the Hebrew celebration of Purim. The fasting and prayers of the Israelite observance described in \textit{The Book of Esther} seem to have inspired their own \textit{Nederlandtsche Gedenck-clanck}.

This was a production commemorating the founding of the Dutch Republic written by Adriaan Valerius, a Dutch lawyer, poet, and musician, and was intended to instruct children through a mixture of prose, song, and plays. This performance included an anthem, which recounts Dutch sixteenth-century religious wars against Spain. This work is still considered one of the founding Dutch national songs. The performances were accompanied by illustrations. The Dutch Republic’s identification with Israel is seen in the engraving \textit{Nedersands Dank-Offer}, 1626 (Figure 26). This work accompanies the last scene of the performance. It is an allegory depicting the seven provinces with the Princess of Orange kneeling before a banner inscribed with the tetragrammaton. Although Esther is not physically represented in the illustration, her presence is alluded to as the performance was recognized as analogous with Purim, the celebration commemorating the Israelites deliverance from Haman’s plot. The performance is followed by a closing prayer that invokes the Israelite covenant with God.\textsuperscript{119}

The prayer combines the biblical Hebraic analogy of imprisonment with the Dutch revolt, and their subsequent deliverance in a “Promised Land”.\textsuperscript{120} It ends with the

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 25.
\textsuperscript{119} Schama, 1987, 98. The tetragrammaton literally means “a letter with four words” referring to the name YHWH, the God of Israel whose name cannot be spoken. It is an example of the Hebraic use of onomatopoeia.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
declaration that Dutch liberty is “...proof of the covenant of blessings made with you.”*121 In the prayer it asks that their country should be blessed that their “...seed may establish themselves through the world and with the powerful guidance of your Holy Spirit may increase and multiply.”*122 This clearly suggests that the people of the Dutch Republic saw themselves as building a nation of both place and people. These performances confirmed the “narrative framework” that enabled the Dutch Republic to identify with Israel as the chosen people and assimilate their divine promise of a utopian future. It also suggests that Esther was clearly recognized as a type who embodied power as it pertained to her heroism, as well as associations with deliverance and the divine promise of a utopian future. This articulation of power would have been understood in seventeenth-century Dutch culture by the female’s contribution to society in domestic and public spheres. The woman in the Jewish Bride is thus identified as Esther, the one chosen to deliver her people from oppression. In Rembrandt’s painting, the man’s hand placed over the heart first, indicates that he recognizes the female as having power in this capacity; while the woman’s hand again infers self-recognition.

Maybe the most outwardly symbolic reference to female power indicated through references to Esther is that of queen-making. 123 There are marked similarities between Rembrandt’s painting, The Jewish Bride, and a study of Saskia he made in 1635, titled The Great Jewish Bride (Figure 27). According to Tümpel, the painting probably received its eponymous name due to the female’s likeness with the earlier print. 124 The scene depicts

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121 Ibid, 99.
122 Ibid. Schama suggests that this image, as well as the theme addressed, were easily recognized in seventeenth-century Dutch culture.
124 Tumpel, 2006. 163.
Esther holding the decree that saved her people. Both women wear almost identical gowns. The face and hair, while different, have the same qualities of shape and texture. At first, it appears that the importance of the scene lies in the decree she is holding, as it is the physical manifestation of Israelite salvation. However, a more thoughtful reading of the text infers that it is because Esther is made queen by Ahasuerus that she has the power to obtain the decree. The significance then of any association with Esther is that her power comes via her queenship.

This motif has an interesting historical precedence in the Lowlands. “The County of Flanders”, named as such between 862 and 1725, instituted specific queen-making rites. Historically, queens like wives, held no real authoritative power, although they were noted as contributing significantly to their households.\(^{125}\) Beginning in the ninth century, a new model for queen-making was instituted for Charles the Bald’s daughter, Judith.\(^{126}\) Historical queen-making rites underscored the legality of succession rights to the throne, limiting her power to pro-creation. However, Judith’s coronation demonstrates that there were expectations for the female beyond her ability to produce an heir. This tradition, which began with Judith, involved the conferring of five blessings upon the queen.\(^{127}\) The fourth blessing has specific ties to the Abrahamic Covenant, and thus to Dutch nation building ideology. The blessing invokes Old Testament models of good wives, including Esther.\(^{128}\)

Aaron, as the symbol of God’s authority, is called upon during the consecration of the queen to establish her divine right to rule. Additionally, Esther is invoked to give

\(^{126}\) This formal queen-making rite began with Ermentude, Charles’ wife, but took on new significance as it was applied to a queen’s rule in alliance with another family. Ibid, 25.
\(^{127}\) Ibid.
prominence to the queen’s membership into the new “chosen people”.\textsuperscript{129} During these rites, it is emphasized that Esther was “anointed” for the salvation of her people, and through her the queen is now bestowed with authority. She is also promised the same blessings. The queen is then given a fertility blessing, which invokes her capacity to “participate” in building a great nation. The female’s participation asserts her equal contribution, and not just her ability to bear children, but also the expectation that she will lead and guide with wisdom. These queen-making rites denote the capacity for actualized female power. These rites were designed to elevate the queen’s status from one that was incidental, to one that was instrumental. The queen’s capacity to be an active contributor to her country was more significant than her ability to bear children.\textsuperscript{130}

Clearly the Dutch may have seen this queen-making tradition as informing their ideological quest as it pertained to building a new Zion. The idea of women being divinely appointed in their participation in nation-building analogous with Esther continued into the seventeenth century. Peacock notes that there was also a tradition of powerful female rulers in the Netherlands beginning in the fifteenth century. These women were respected as strong capable, and intelligent leaders. The continued succession of these female rulers suggests that the notion of female power was not only accepted but also encouraged. It also indicates that these women participated in the creation of Dutch society.\textsuperscript{131} Thus, female power via her contribution in nation-building must have been manifested in seventeenth-century Dutch visual culture. In linking these cultural manifestations of female power with

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{129}{J. Smith, 1997, 26.}
\footnotetext{130}{Ibid, 27.}
\end{footnotes}
the popularity of paintings depicting Old Testament couples, it becomes apparent that these concepts are represented in the image of the *Jewish Bride*.

While Rembrandt’s painting has been studied in depth, the notion of the female portrayed as a representation of power has yet to be explored in depth. Not only does this idea warrant exploration, but it suggests that other historical couples portraiture may offer new insights into themes of female power through associations with biblical women. A more thorough examination of the layering of both the texts and images referenced in Rembrandt’s *Jewish Bride* provides a clearer indication that his painting may have been understood on multiple levels as a composite biblical woman in Dutch society. In fact, it is difficult to insist that this couple could only reference one theme, either sacred or secular. It embodies the artist’s noted ability to reference multiple types, encourage various readings, and appeal to diverse audiences.

Many art historians have debated the identity of the couple in the *Jewish Bride*. The subject seems to occupy most scholarship on the painting. The painting can certainly be argued as representing Rebecca, Ruth, or Esther based on iconographic and scientific evidence. However, as Rembrandt did not leave any commentary as to the subject of his painting, he left an opportunity for multiple interpretations. Because he created a work that could be interpreted as referencing different Old Testament couples, the painting allowed viewers to identify with whichever aspect of the various biblical figures informed their personal and collective lives.

The debate over female power in the seventeenth century set the stage for the painting to become a reference point indicating the woman’s position in both home and society. Contradictory images, presenting women as both virtuous and base, appear to have
held equal space in both public and private domains. Religious toleration, greater equality of rights, and economic concerns, informed the Dutch about women’s participation in society more so than elsewhere in Europe at that time.

Seventeenth-century Dutch society recognized their invented heroic past as it was preached from both sacred pulpits and public institutions through the stories of the Old Testament. A “narrative framework” can be recognized in the building of their historical past as they identified themselves with Israel as children of the covenant. Through these scriptural references to God’s chosen people, the Dutch could ask questions about their past, and seek answers for their future.

Seventeenth-century Dutch society looked to biblical types to understand who they were both individually and as a nation. The three female types supporting their nation-building ideology, namely, Rebecca, Ruth, and Esther, have been identified as the woman in the biblical couple represented in the Jewish Bride. The narratives of each pair together completed all the aspects important to their cultural goal of building a new Zion. Each of the three females noted embodied qualities that were recognized through their portrayals in both literature and in images. Their resulting depictions represented notions of power through their specific narratives. The painting also references formal artistic conventions that suggest the woman in the Jewish Bride has power in her marriage relationship. As a partner in marriage, the woman’s equal position in Rembrandt’s composition indicates that she should be recognized as a source of power. The couple has similar ties with other depictions of Dutch marriage, which also connote intimacy, equality, and respect.

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132 Ibid, 68. Schama also posits that the Dutch looked to their Batavian past and the rebellion against Rome, but that scripture was more easily recognizable. This allowed the scriptural past to be identifiable as an assumed identity.
133 Ibid.
Rembrandt's noted ambiguity in subject matter, together with seventeenth-century Dutch artistic practices, encouraged and allowed the viewer to recognize the painting as depicting the female power that contributed to the Dutch Republic’s ideology of nation-building.
Figure 1 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. *Portrait of Two Figures from the Old Testament, Known as The Jewish Bride*. 1667. Rijksmuseum. Amsterdam.
Figure 2 Erhard Schön. Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah and Jael. First Block of a Woodcut of Twelve Exemplary Women of the Old Testament. About 1530. Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Sammlung der Kunstakade. Düsseldorf.

Figure 4 Concordia Maritale. After Ripa 1625.
Figure 5 Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius. 1565-1607. *The True Marriage*. From a series of three prints.
Figure 6 Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, 1565-1607. Marriage Based on Lust. From a series of three prints.
Figure 7 Jan Sanraendam after Hendrick Goltzius. 1565-1607. *Marriage Based on Avarice and Luxury*. From a series of three prints.
Figure 8 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. *The Shipbuilder and his Wife.* 1633. The Royal Collection. London.
Figure 9 Jan Miense Molenaer. *The Sense of Touch*. 1637. Maritshuis. The Hague.
Figure 10 Raphael. *Isaac and Rebecca Spied upon by Abimalech*. 1518-1519. Palazzi Pontifici, Vatican.
Figure 11 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. *Preparatory Study for the “Jewish Bride“*. About 1667.
Figure 12 X-Ray image of the Jewish Bride.
Figure 13 Artist Unknown. *The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca*. 1490's. Rijksmuseum. Amsterdam
Figure 14 Simeon Solomon. *Isaac and Rebecca*. 1863. Victoria and Albert Museum. London.
Figure 15 Hendrick Goltzius. *The Annunciation*. 1594. Frontispiece to *The Life of the Virgin*.
Figure 16 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. *Hands from Portrait of two Figures* (see figure 1)
Figure 17 Jan II Collaert after Maarten de Vos. *Ruth* from the series *Exemplary Women of the Old Testament*, 1561-1620. Holl.98.
Figure 18 Aert de Gelder. *Ruth and Boaz*. About 1680. Akademie der Bildenden Künst. Vienna.
Figure 20 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Saskia as Flora*. 1641. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. Dresden.
Figure 21 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther*. 1660. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. Moscow.
Figure 22 Jan Victors after Lastman. *Esther and Haman before Ahasuerus*. 1638-40. Wallraf Richartz Museum. Cologne.
Figure 23 Pieter Lastman. *Haman Pleads to Esther for Mercy*. 1618. Museum Nardowe. Warsaw.
Figure 25 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. Portrait of Johannes Wtenbogaert. 1633. Rijksmuseum. Amsterdam.
Figure 26 Anon. Nederlands Dank-Offer. From Adrianus Valerius, Nederlantsche Gedencklanck. 1626. Haarlem.
Figure 27 Rembrandt Harmenz van Rijn. Study of Saskia known as The Great Jewish Bride, 1635. B., Holl. 340; H. 127; BB. 35-C.
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