

## THE BOOK OF TOBIT

*Tobias healing his father's blindness* (bottom: painting, 1636; middle: drawing, detail, ca. 1638; top, drawing, detail, ca. 1640)



This apocryphal book of the Old Testament was a recurring source of subject-matter and inspiration for Rembrandt throughout his career. It is a tale of piety, especially filial piety, a Prodigal Son story with a much happier end, and so full of supernatural occurrences that it almost deserves to be called a fairytale.\* Family harmony is the rule. Father, son and even grandfather have similar names: *Tobit*, *Tobias*, and *Tobiel*. The interest of this particular tale is that it thematizes blindness in the father-son relation in a positive sense: the father becomes blind (with bird dung) and will be cured by his son (with fish gall). The blindness is not just physical, but also psychological, for Tobit is a temperamental man, righteous and subject to fits of rage. Thus the theme of blindness (or mutilation of sight) in Rembrandt's work should also be considered in connection with that of anger and rage, which can also blind.

Some of his earliest works depict episodes that involve this most intense of emotions, which was often attributed to God in the Old Testament: Jesus chasing the money-changers out of the Temple (1626, Br. 532), Tobit praying for death (1626, Br. 486), and Balaam's ass and the admonishing angel (1626, Br. 487). The Balaam features a sword-wielding angel who might just as well be Rembrandt in another of his many heroic disguises (see figs. entries 11 and 39).\*\*

However, Tobias accomplishes his mission with exemplary success, collecting his father's debts, exorcising a demon, getting



married and a generous dowry before returning home, where he restores his father's sight thanks to the help of an archangel in disguise named Raphael (which means "he who heals" in Hebrew). Transposing this plot to Rembrandt's own biography, we can easily imagine the drama of a father who was "blind" to his son's vocation and resisted it for a long time, until his eyes were finally opened through to the agency of Art, alias *Raphael*.\*\*\* This quite plausible scenario is substantiated by Jan Jansz Orlor's biographical sketch of 1641, in which he says that his father, after having put him in school to learn a liberal profession, ultimately had to relent and give in to his son's wishes to be a painter (a variation on this theme recurs in his biography of Gerrit Dou, Rembrandt's first pupil). Rembrandt, who enjoyed a fairly advanced education, began learning his craft quite late, around 1620: in comparison, Jan Lievens, one year his junior, had already finished his three-year apprenticeship with Lastman by then (see entry 26).

The only portrait of Rembrandt's father designated as such is a drawing in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (Ben. 56) that bears the autograph inscription "HARMAN GERRITS. van den Rhijn" (see entry 6). It shows a man with eyes pressed shut who could be either asleep, absorbed in thought or sightless. The importance of the Book of Tobit for the young Rembrandt may be measured by the fact that it is the likeliest source for the real subject of the Philosopher in meditation (ca. 1631, Br. 431, see entry 11; fig. far right, reproduced in an engraving by Basan in 1771), which is probably also related to the portrait drawing. The only iconographic detail missing in the Philosopher is Anna's spinning wheel: *a circle with radiating spokes* (see the painting from 1636, previous page, bottom, and Rembrandt's etching from 1651, right, The Blind Tobit, B 142).



\* It is full of sermonizing, but contains interesting narrative details, including an instance of simultaneity between distant, as yet unconnected characters:

*"The self-same time came Tobit home, and entered into his house, and Sara the daughter of Raguel came down from her upper chamber"*(Tobit: 3:17).

This detail might explain the staircase in Br. 431 and the third figure (invisible in the present state of the painting, see engraving from 1771, above).

\*\* *"And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she fell down under Ba'-laam: and Ba'-laam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff.*

*... And Ba'-laam said unto the ass, because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now I would kill thee.*

*... Then the Lord opened the eyes of Ba'-laam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face."* (Num. 22: 27-30)

\*\*\* Conversely, for the young Rembrandt, art may have provided an outlet for his emotions. In a similar vein, David could interpret King Saul's dreams and dissipate his dark moods, or "evil spirits," by playing the harp.