

Abraham and the Angels: Rembrandt at New York's Frick Collection

By [Prof. Sam Ben-Meir](#)

Global Research, August 01, 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Religion](#)

Visitors to the Frick Collection in New York City will likely be familiar with the magnificent Self Portrait (1658) of Rembrandt that hangs in the main gallery. The artist presents himself as an imposing father-figure, like some patriarch of old. His dress is formal, and utterly distinctive – a gold apron, a red sash – while his prominent and imposing hands proclaim his trade. And yet beneath that intimidating, almost royal, exterior is an unmistakable vulnerability, a strength borne of having suffered life's calamities, and emerged from the awful trials that the world inflicts upon one and all.

The Frick Collection is currently hosting a show focused on a handful of smaller but no less breathtaking works by the Dutch master, Rembrandt van Rijn (1696-1669), devoted to certain events in the life of another patriarch, Abraham – progenitor of the Jews and acknowledged father of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.



Henry C. Frick House on 5th Avenue in New York, today contains the Frick Collection. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The crown of the show is Abraham Entertaining the Angels (1646), which depicts the story of the foretelling of the birth of Isaac to the elderly couple Abraham and Sarah: "The Lord appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the door of the tent in the heat of the day" (Genesis 18:1). Abraham is ninety-nine years old, and it is only a few days since his circumcision. Though still physically recovering, he sits at the entrance of the tent to see if there is a passerby whom he might take into his house. Abraham, we are told, lifted up his eyes and saw three men standing near him.

In Jewish commentary, these were angels – specifically, Rafael, Gabriel, and the greatest of them, Michael – in the form of humans. According to Rashi, one was to announce the birth of Isaac to Sarah, one to destroy Sodom, and one to heal Abraham, “for one angel does not two errands.” Christian apologists wanted to view Abraham’s heavenly visitors as an Old Testament allusion to the Holy Trinity. Rembrandt seems to weave between Jewish and Christian exegesis, and in the process, charts a course of his own, developing a distinctive interpretation.

The painting, oil on oak panel, offers us a kind of progressive revelation. The angel whose back is to the viewer reflects only the slightest degree of light, his wings are folded and tucked behind him, and his bare feet protrude from under his garb, giving him the appearance of an ordinary traveler. The second angel, whom we see in profile, reflects more of the light received from the incandescent being at center. His wings are not fully unfurled but beginning to stretch out. Only with the third celestial visitor, whose face is to us, do we have a glimpse of the divine per say: he is clothed all in white, and he radiates a luminous glow, the light accumulating in the folds of his gown; while his wings, unfolded and outstretched, affirm his deific stature.

Only a faint trace of the light settles on Abraham’s sleeve, though we can detect in his attitude the growing awareness that something miraculous is taking place. As Sarah stands and looks on from the shadows she expresses disbelief that she will bear a child at her advanced age – and the divine reply comes in the form of a rhetorical question: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”



Abraham Entertaining the Angels, 1646 (Source: [The Frick Collection](#))

Abraham’s firstborn son is Ishmael, whom he fathered with the slave Hagar. Rembrandt’s 1637 etching of Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael, depicts the scene in which mother and son are banished as a consequence of Isaac’s birth. In Chapter 21 of Genesis, Sarah tells her husband to expel Ishmael and his mother from their home; and ultimately God will speak to Abraham and command him to do as Sarah says – reaffirming the promise made earlier that his son Isaac will inherit his covenant, while Ishmael will also become the father of a great nation. Sarah smiles with satisfaction as the forlorn Hagar makes her way, a sturdy young Ishmael by her side; and almost regal Abraham stands inactive on the threshold of his lavish home, outstretched arms underscoring his subjection.

An etching, Abraham Caressing Isaac (ca. 1637-45), does not depict a specific biblical episode. This is a different Abraham than the one that cast out Hagar and Ishmael. No magnificent finery: this is a more modest and rural Abraham. He fondly holds the boy Isaac, while on his brow we can see the pensiveness, the somber and searching gaze of the father who will be commanded by God to make a sacrificial offering of his son.



Abraham Caressing Isaac, ca. 1637-45 (Source: [The Frick Collection](#))

An etching from 1645, Abraham and Isaac, takes its inspiration from Chapter 22 of Genesis, a moment of dialogue between father and son: Isaac asks his father, as he holds a bundle of wood for the burnt offering, ‘Why is no lamb present?’ And Abraham tells his son, ‘God will

provide the lamb' – and as he does so, Rembrandt has him gesture upwards to the heavens. A deep shadow is cast over Isaac's face, heightening the sense of foreboding, and consistent with the reading that at this point "Isaac understood that he was going to be slaughtered."

The Sacrifice of Isaac (ca. 1652-54) is a startling work for the terrible violence it brings into focus. Abraham covers the boy's mouth to stifle his cries, but his eyes are left open to witness the knife. The father is apparently unaware of the angel above him, senseless to the angel's hand on his head. Abraham has become as pitiless as the command he's obeying – and it is precisely that obedience, that complete and utter preparedness to go to the end, which is truly frightening, inasmuch as it has become so very real.

Rembrandt's etching of the Sacrifice of Isaac (1655) strikes a very different tone. The emphasis here is on Abraham's inwardness, his inner conflict. Now the father covers his son's eyes, and draws the boy's head to his own body, a small but significant gesture of comfort, far removed from the harrowing filicide of the earlier drawing. Isaac calmly bares himself, innocently submitting to the knife, while Abraham, apparently insensible of the angel that is holding him from behind and staying him from the deed, fixes his darkened eyes on the ram that will replace his son as the burnt offering. The angel's face is close to Abraham but remains unseen by the patriarch, who listens inwardly rather to the unknown voice.

The Akedah takes the measure of man's faith, presenting the ultimate test of our obedience and submission to God. In Rembrandt's drawing of the sacrifice, he does not shy away from the brutal reality of what is unfolding. Rembrandt renders us an Abraham not unlike the portrait that we find in Hegel: "Love alone was beyond [Abraham's] power; even the one love he had, his love for his son, even his hope of posterity... could depress him, trouble his all-exclusive heart and disquiet it to such an extent that even this love he once wished to destroy, and his heart was quieted only through the certainty of the feeling that this love was not so strong as to render him unable to slay his beloved son with his own hand."

Rembrandt's Abraham reveals a complex and emotional engagement with the story of the patriarch. The artist's understanding of his Biblical subject was anything but static: his drawings, etchings and paintings are evidence of a searching, questioning orientation – an openness to readings that acknowledge the burden of faith, the trials of fatherhood, and the ineradicable mystery of being.

Sam Ben-Meir, PhD is an adjunct professor at Mercy College. His current research focuses on environmental ethics and animal studies. sam@alonben-meir.com Web: www.alonben-meir.com

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Prof. Sam Ben-Meir](#), Global Research, 2017

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. Sam Ben-Meir](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca