

REMBRANDT'S HERMENEUTIC: A CASE STUDY OF THE EMMAUS PRODUCTIONS

Journals of Arts & Humanities Studies

Vol. 1: Issue 1

Page 1–5 © The Author(s) 2025

Received: 24 April 2025

Accepted: 25 May 2025

Published: 31 May 2025



Calvin Mercer- *Professor of Religion, Religious Studies Program, East Carolina University*

ABSTRACT

Biblical themes comprise about one third of the paintings, etchings, and drawings of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. This article is a close examination of Rembrandt's depictions of the "Christ at Emmaus" story in the Gospel of Luke. His two paintings, four etchings, and at least seven drawings of this story reveal a progressively deeper interpretation of the text. He moves from presenting the story as a dramatic, miraculous event to an appreciation of a loving Christ reaching out pastorally to the disciples.

KEY WORDS

Biblical, Christ, Emmaus, Hermeneutics, Rembrandt

Biblical themes comprise about one third of the paintings, etchings, and drawings of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn.¹ Clearly, the Bible was important to Rembrandt; how it was important and the manner in which the artist interpreted the Bible is our concern. Rembrandt moved through progressively deeper understandings of the texts he painted. To illustrate the thesis, his major productions related to the Emmaus theme are examined in chronological order. Because he returned to the Emmaus story often, it provides excellent material for a study of how Rembrandt's interpretation of the Bible changed over time.²

Christ at Emmaus: The Text

The story of Christ appearing at Emmaus with the two men occurs only in Luke 24:13-35.³ Luke does not mention all the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, but he describes this particular one in some detail. Two men, probably members of the wider circle of Jesus' disciples, are walking to the village of

¹ See A. Hyatt Mayor, *Rembrandt and the Bible* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). W. A. Visser 'T Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, trans. K. Gregor Smith (London: SCM, 1957), indicates that 145 out of 650 paintings, 70 out of 300 etchings, and 575 out of from 1,250 to 1,500 drawings are derived from biblical texts

² For an excellent general introduction to Rembrandt and his biblical focus, with particular attention to Rembrandt's Christian faith, see John I. Durham, *The Biblical Rembrandt: Human Painter in a Landscape of Faith* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004). Cf. Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University 2009). Claudio Pescio, *Rembrandt* (Minneapolis: Oliver Press, 2008), gives attention to the religious context of Rembrandt's life and work.

³ However, cf. Mark 16:12-13, which occurs in the longer and suspect ending of this gospel

Emmaus while discussing the events surrounding the end of Jesus' life. His identity unknown to them, the resurrected Jesus begins walking and talking with the men. Jesus pretends not to be aware of the events to which the men refer and they, therefore, relate to him their knowledge of the things that had happened, their perplexity over the events, and what their expectations of Jesus had been. Jesus in turn rebukes them for not seeing clearly, points out that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and interprets the Hebrew scriptures in light of their relation to him.

Up to this point in the story, the evangelist emphasizes two things. First, Luke underscores the dullness of the disciples. Although Jesus walked with them, they failed to recognize (literally "know") Jesus (verses 15-16). Jesus later rebukes them as "foolish men" and "slow of heart to believe" (verse 25). Even after he interprets the scriptures to them, they still do not realize his identity.

Second, the disciples' lack of recognition can be attributed to their misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' messiahship. Jesus was "a prophet mighty in deed and word" (verse 19) and they "had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (verse 21).

Apparently, their eyes were blind to the fact that the crucifixion was necessary part of Jesus' messiahship. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Jesus asked them (verse 25). The men remind us of Peter who, at Caesarea Philippi, correctly confessed Jesus as "the Christ," but had an incorrect understanding of the nature of that confession, thinking Jesus was come to be a political Messiah.

Christ at Emmaus: The Art

The Emmaus theme was, as noted earlier, one of Rembrandt's favorites. At least four times he painted the moment at which Christ broke the bread. He etched his interpretation of this scene two times. Seven known drawings are related to some aspect of the Emmaus story, although not all depict the crucial moment at which the bread is broken. Numerous drawings judged by scholars to be copies or attributions have also survived. Here is a chronological listing of the paintings, etchings, drawings, copies, and attributions related to the Christ at Emmaus theme:⁴

- 1628 circa (painting). Bolten pp. 20-21.
- 1628-30 circa (drawing). A copy. Benesch C5 (not reproduced). 1629 circa (drawing). Benesch 11.
- 1632-33 circa (drawing). Benesch 68A. 1633-34 circa (drawing). Benesch 87.
- 1634 (etching). B 88.
- 1647 circa (drawing). Benesch 585.
- 1648 (painting). Bolten p. 115; Bolten catalogue 369.
- 1648 (painting). Bolten p. 370 1648-49 (drawing). A copy. Benesch C47.
- 1652 circa (drawing). A copy. Benesch C70 (not reproduced). 1654 (etching). B. 87.
- 1655-56 circa (drawing). Benesch 987.
- 1655-56 circa (drawing). Benesch 992.
- 1655-56 circa (drawing). Benesch 1383. 1660 (drawing). Attribution. Benesch A66.
- 1660-61 circa (painting). Bolten catalogue 516.

One of the most striking paintings of the early Rembrandt is that of the 1628 Christ at Emmaus. Here, while experimenting with the expression of emotion and especially the play of light, Rembrandt has interpreted the crucial moment in the Emmaus story--the moment indicated by Luke 24:30-31.

Three people other than Christ are in the painting. Luke mentions only two men. Rembrandt,

⁴ Since the important details of the productions to be discussed will be explained, it is not necessary for the reader to have access to the works of Rembrandt. However, if the reader is interested, references in this list are to standard works which should be available in most art history collections: J. Bolten and H. Bolten-Rempt, *The Hidden Rembrandt*, trans. Danielle Adkinson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1977); Otto Benesch, *The Complete Drawings of Rembrandt*, 6 vols. (New York: Phaidon Press, 1973); Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: All the Etchings Reproduced in True Size*, (Condom: Oresko Books, 1977). The two etching references are to the Schwartz collection. For the sake of completeness, the drawings are contained in the list; however, being only tentative studies for a painting or etching, most of the drawings are not discussed in this paper.

however, has a third person, perhaps a cook, in the left part of the painting. The cook, along with the two disciples, provide three different reactions to the resurrected Christ.

The startled disciple, seen frontally, reacts with fear and surprise. His hands upraised and his body drawn back, the startled disciple breaks the movement of the other three figures. The kneeling disciple, who had perhaps overturned the chair in astonishment, now kneels before Christ. Of the two disciples, one fearful and one worshipful, only the fearful disciple is seen clearly. The kneeling disciple cannot be seen in any detail. The cook is oblivious to the revelation that has occurred.

As for the Christ figure, the light behind Christ appears to indicate that this, indeed, is the Lord. Rembrandt, however, is here hesitant to indicate the nature of this figure. The figure, while commanding and prominent, is dark and seen only from the side. The figure is central, and it is the resurrected Christ, but Rembrandt is not yet ready to look full into his face.

It is interesting to compare the 1629 circa drawing with 1628 painting.⁵ Rembrandt seems more daring in his portrayal of Christ in the drawing than he was in the painting. The figure of Christ is a most vigorous one; rays emanate from him, and the lines from Christ to the apostles indicate almost complete control of them. Although seen from the side, the face of Christ is shown in more detail than in the painting. The eyes are stern, and the rigid Christ looks impatient with the disciples. In this experimental drawing, Rembrandt seems bolder than in the painting, meant to be a finished product for public viewing.

In the 1634 etching, Rembrandt's interpretation of verses 30-31 has deepened. Since 1628, Rembrandt has buried his father (1630), moved to Amsterdam (1631), and married Saskia van Uylenburgh (1634). Some significant differences can be observed between this etching and the 1628 painting. Christ, now obviously in the process of breaking the bread, is seen from a three quarters angle. We see more of his face, yet it is still not a totally revealing face. The aura surrounding Christ's head makes clear his identity.

Two disciples in the etching are now both seen clearly.⁶ The one on Christ's right is no longer fearful. His expression, while difficult to interpret, may reflect an element of unbelief. The other disciple has his hands together, probably more in contemplation than prayer. Finally, the dog in the foreground, the bone, and the equipment apparently belonging to the man on Christ's left all suggest this is no heavenly scene tucked away from the real world. It is an event, though cosmic in significance, which is incarnated in the context of everyday life. The breaking of the bread was the crucial medium revealing the Lord's identity to the two disciples. It was also a common, everyday occurrences which attracted a hungry, begging dog to the edge of the table.

The 1648 painting is the next significant work on the Christ at Emmaus theme and is perhaps the best painting of the theme.

Here Christ is not seen from the side, nor from three quarters, but frontally. He is in the center of the group and the center of attention. The massive enclosure behind Christ encircles him. The aureole surrounding his head is obvious but not obtrusive. The hands, eyes, and motion of the three persons all bring our attention back to Christ, who looks upward toward the Father. Jesus is obviously Messiah, yet his face expresses that he is also suffering Messiah. There is a look of weariness. In the breaking of the bread, he was known not only as Christ but as one who had to suffer.

The disciples and cook are just as carefully drawn in this painting. The disciple on Christ's right is obviously worshipping the Lord. His hands are clasped in attentive worship. The other disciple looks with keen interest. The element of fear and surprise can be observed in the left hand. The right hand and the face, though, reflect deep concentration. "Who is this?" or maybe, more accurately, "What am I to do with him?" is perhaps the question he is asking. The cook, as in 1628, probably does not know what is happening. However, it is possible that he is looking at the broken bread with indecision about what he should do next.

⁵ Some scholars have dated the drawing at about the same time as the painting. E.g., Benesch, *The Complete Drawings of Rembrandt*, 1:6

⁶ The cook or servant is absent in the 1634 etching. J. P. Filedt Kok, *Rembrandt Etchings and Drawings in the Rembrandt House: A Catalogue* (Amsterdam: Rembrandt House, 1972) suggests that a servant figure originally in the left background is now covered by hatching. See p. 81.

Significantly, connection has been made by art scholars between the painting being considered and Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. The subject of Christ and the design of the painting, as well as a woodcut by

Durer, suggest that Rembrandt was drawing a parallel between the institution of the Lord's Supper and the Emmaus story.⁷

It is clear that in this painting Rembrandt has significantly reworked his earlier treatments of the Emmaus theme. By 1648 both his mother and Saskia have died and his son Titus has been born. At 42 years of age, Rembrandt has now experienced some of the joy, suffering, and mystery of life. His deeper acquaintance with life and God are reflected in his interpretation of the Christ at Emmaus story as seen in this painting.

In 1654 Rembrandt returned to the Emmaus theme in an etching where significant similarities and differences exist between this etching and Rembrandt's earlier treatments. As in the earlier works, especially the 1648 painting, Christ is still the center of the picture. The rounded doorway of 1648 has become a set of draperies. The draperies, though, serve the same function of setting Christ in the center. The rays surrounding his head make it clear he is the resurrected Lord. The eyes of all the other figures lead to Christ. Again the dog, though not as prominent as in the 1634 etching, makes us realize that this occurred in an ordinary house at an ordinary table.

The differences, though, are striking and reflect Rembrandt's continuing interpretation of the text. Here Christ is looking at the two men. He is not lost in divine contemplation as in 1648; rather, he is actively engaged in visual communication with the two men. His hands, spread apart with large pieces of bread in them, seem to say, "Come, eat." There is an abundance of bread on the table. The Christ of this etching reflects a pastoral and interpersonal appeal unseen in any earlier treatment. The Christ has a look of kindness and of one who desires fellowship with the men.

The two men in earlier treatments are usually seated and reacting in their own way to Christ. Here their heads are turned to Christ and their eyes look at him, as if to say, "You recognize me, now come and fellowship with me." The cook is now the one looking at Christ with hands clasped. She reflects not only worship, but love as well.

The last painting (1660-61 circa), technically very weak, adds nothing new to the interpretation of the Emmaus text.

Summary Conclusion

By focusing on the Emmaus paintings and etching of 1628, 1634, 1648, and 1654, one can observe a clear development in Rembrandt's understanding of the text. As opposed to the dramatic effect of Christ in the earlier portrayals, Rembrandt over time exhibits an increasing appreciation for the person and significance of Christ and the inner meaning of the Emmaus event as it shows up in the lives of the disciples. In his earlier work, it is the sheer drama of the text that captures his fancy. Later, his concerns is with faith and its deep impact on individuals.

In 1628, Rembrandt's Christ is divine as shown by the use of light. However, Rembrandt is hesitant to reveal the face and inner nature of this divine personage.

Christ looms large, but is he loving or wrathful, self-centered or outgoing? Rembrandt does not say. In 1634, Christ is seen three quarters, breaking the bread and looking upward. A full revelation of sorts is painted in 1648. Christ is seen frontally. As in 1634 he is breaking the bread and looking upward; yet in the 1648 painting there is a depth and quality about the divine nature that is not seen in 1634. Finally, in 1654 a totally new aspect of Christ surfaces. His divinity is still evident; but now one can observe a definite interpersonal and pastoral appeal.

⁷ For a discussion of this suggestion see Kenneth Clark. *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 60. See also Kok, p. 81.

The same kind of development can be seen in the response of persons to Christ. Studied reflection becomes worship and finally loving adoration. In 1628, the cook and the worshipping disciple are not seen in any detail. Their response is portrayed as cognitive reflection in 1634 and finally as worship in 1648. The uninterested cook of 1628 is shown in detail in 1648 and finally as a loving worshipper in 1654. The loving worship of the cook in 1654 is paralleled by the hesitancy of the men in that same etching. They are invited to eat with Christ; but what will they do? That is the challenge of the text as Rembrandt sees it. Han Redeker's observation is on target: "...

Rembrandt in the end surely remains the painter, the etcher, and the drawer of the human being..."⁸

While we have concentrated on the Emmaus story, a preliminary survey suggests that other themes to which Rembrandt returned more than once also exhibits the kind of development observed in the Emmaus productions. For example, in 1632, in *The Raising of Lazarus* (B 73), Rembrandt etched a dramatic account of the physical miracle. Men are terrified, Lazarus is drawn from the grave by a supernatural power, and Christ looms large with hand raised as he directs the action. In 1642 (B 72), the same text is etched with a very different tone. The people are amazed but not terrified and one is bowing in worship. Jesus, seen frontally now, is Lord not because of his extreme power but because of his person and charisma. Lazarus looks at Jesus in faith.

It is not surprising that the maturation and life experience of an artist would influence their work. Illustrating that in a close examination of how an artist evolves over time in painting the same story can be useful in appreciating their interpretation of, in this case, the Bible.

⁸ Hans Redeker *Rembrandt* (New York: Barner & Noble, Inc., 1965), p. 85. In this connection, Franz Landsberger *Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible*, trans. Felix N. Gerson (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1946), p. 107, points out that Rembrandt was not necessarily interested in the cosmic happenings, but, rather, in the relation of the deity to the human being.