

A. Hyatt Mayor

# REMBRANDT AND THE BIBLE



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by A. Hyatt Mayor

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FRONTISPIECE:

*Self-portrait at age thirty-three.  
Etching, second state, 1639. After  
Rembrandt had sketched Raphael's  
portrait of Castiglione at an  
Amsterdam auction, he etched  
himself in a similar fashion. In this  
year 1639 the full tide of fortune  
had brought him a grand new house*

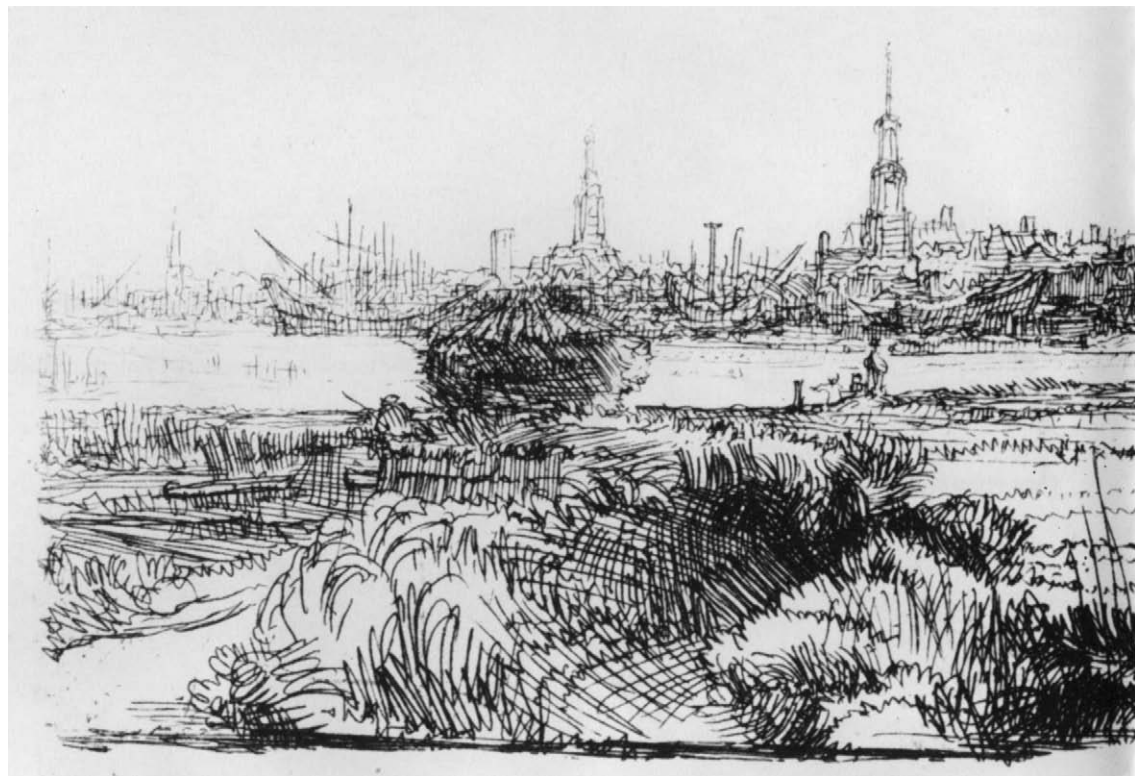
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# Rembrandt and the Bible

**I**N THAT BUNDLE of personalities known as Rembrandt, each one of us recognizes some aspect of himself. So “my” Rembrandt is not “your” Rembrandt because our different backgrounds and temperaments find their reflections in Rembrandt’s wildly differing moments. He responded to more aspects of life than any other artist, for he had no trace of most artists’ main stock in trade—taste. You show taste by what you reject, and Rembrandt rejected nothing human. One can easily imagine him communing with Mantegna and Dürer or Raphael, with Rabelais and Saint Theresa. But one cannot imagine him sipping tea with Walter Pater.

Generations of searchers have discovered much about Rembrandt’s life. His personal experiences matter because they often let him look with unique intimacy into myth and history. He was born in Leiden on July 15, 1606, the eighth of nine children of Harmen Gerritszoon van Rijn, who worked a malt mill known as the Rijn Muhle, and Cornelia Willemsdochter, who must have dominated him, for he gave her name to three of his daughters. Only two of Rembrandt’s brothers survived to maturity, one becoming a shoemaker and the other a baker like their mother’s father. When Rembrandt was fourteen he enrolled briefly in Leiden University, but quickly rejected scholastic regimentation for a three-year apprenticeship with a mediocre painter, Jacob van Swanenburgh. After acquiring some technical competence, he worked for a winter in Amsterdam under Pieter Lastman, who had spent several years in Rome painting Biblical subjects with baroque emphasis. Lastman must have brought home some of the engravings after Raphael and his followers which were to inspire Rembrandt throughout his life. In his early twenties Rembrandt organized his own workshop with assistants, who were to number about forty in the next thirty years. These assistants carried out Rembrandt’s designs in paintings that Rembrandt retouched, signed, and sold, according to the usual practice of the day. When he was twenty-three he found a pub-



lisher to market his etchings, making about a third of his prints—mostly little experimental studies—in four or five years, after which he was distracted from etching by becoming one of Amsterdam's most fashionable portrait painters. At this crest of his fortunes, shortly before his twenty-eighth birthday, he married Saskia van Uylenburgh, the wealthy niece of an art dealer in whose house he had been living. With her money and the fees from his many portraits, he assembled one of the greatest art collections ever owned by an artist. Northern and Italian paintings gradually covered the walls in practically every room of the ample house that he bought when he was thirty-three, while he filled scrapbooks with superb prints and drawings. There he filed away the best impressions of his own prints as well as hundreds of his sketches classified by subject for easy reference when he needed ideas for paintings. He absorbed all these works of art so thoroughly into his eye that he put no collector's mark on the hundreds of his prints and drawings that must be in every great print collection today.

Saskia's first three children, including the first two Cornelias, all died as infants, leaving only the fourth, Titus (1641-1668), to grow up. On the day before Rembrandt's thirty-sixth birthday, Saskia's death, after a long illness, ended eight years of marriage. Though he managed to keep the income from her dowry by never remarrying, the sum was too small to rescue him from money troubles. After Saskia's death, he lived for perhaps six or seven years with Titus's nurse until she became insane and had to be sent away. When Rembrandt was about forty, a plump peasant girl, Hendrickje Stoffels, had entered the household and become his mistress, in time bearing the third Cornelia, the only child to survive both her parents. Hendrickje signed documents with an X, but she was not stupid, and she was compassionate. Rembrandt's paintings of her show that he loved her more tenderly than any other woman. When he overspent for works of art until he could no longer meet the

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*1. Amsterdam. Etching, second state, about 1640. In his first landscape etching Rembrandt sketched the steeples on the copper as he saw them, so that they printed in reverse. He was not making a factual view, but a picture*





2. *The Painter's Studio*, by Aert de Gelder (1645-1727). Oil on wood. The armchair at the left, or one just like it, appears in Rembrandt's portraits. If this painting does not show Rembrandt's own studio, it at least shows how he must have focused daylight on his sitters. The window does not have a pull shade, but a hinged frame stretched with linen to reflect light from various angles. Aert de Gelder was one of Rembrandt's close associates

installments on his large house, the bankruptcy court inventoried his possessions ten days after his fiftieth birthday. The ensuing sales of his collections so glutted the market that the proceeds failed to satisfy his creditors. He moved to a cheap house, taking his equipment for painting and etching; Hendrickje and Titus owned everything and legally hired Rembrandt to work for them. Hendrickje died when Rembrandt was fifty-seven, just as failing eyesight forced him to give up etching. The house became still quieter when Titus married and almost immediately died, reducing the family to the daughter of fourteen, Cornelia, and the daughter-in-law, who bore a baby, Titia, four months after Titus's death. Finally, when he was sixty-three, Rembrandt himself died and was buried on October 8, 1669.

Rembrandt's fifty working years neatly fill the half century of Holland's peak of glory. He was the contemporary of the brilliant princes of Nassau—Maurice (1567-1625), his brother Frederick Henry (1584-1647), and William (1626-1650)—of the legendary admirals Maarten Tromp (1597-1653) and Michiel Adriaanzoon de Ruyter (1607-1676), who swept the seas as far away as the Mediterranean and the South Pacific—of Holland's classic poets Jacob Cats (1577-1660), Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679), and Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687).

Amsterdam had been preparing itself for a long time while the Dutch, like the ancient Phoenicians or today's Greeks, amassed money by shipping other people's goods. Around 1500, a century before Rembrandt's birth, Amsterdam shipwrights had already slimmed and lengthened their vessels to speed them for two trips, instead of one, during each short summer sailing season



into the Baltic for grain to fill the city's warehouses. They also met the Portuguese spice fleet in Lisbon on its late summer return from the East just in time to hurry a lucrative cargo northward before the fall storms broke. This southern trade stopped in 1579 when the Northern Netherlands declared war on Spain and Portugal, forcing the Dutch crews to buccaneer their way to new markets in the Americas, in Southeast Asia, and in South Africa. During all this time, when thousands of Europeans were starving to death, the North Sea herring fleet fed the Dutch. That a paltry land of drained mud flats, managed by merchants whose ancestors had not won glory in the Crusades, should nevertheless prosper more than France—this baffled and angered Louis XIV and Colbert, who thought of wealth as a fixed quantity, their share being lessened if their neighbors got more.

Amsterdam gathered in the world's strange peoples and their stranger products, which Rembrandt jumbled together with sovereign disregard. His life developed in phase with the prodigious evolution of his country. From the time he was three until he was fifteen, a truce with Spain allowed Holland to turn from the waste of war to tooling up for the profits of peace. In 1628, when Rembrandt first dated an etching and was organizing his career, the Dutch captured the richest bullion fleet sailing from America to Spain, flooding Holland with ready cash. In 1648, when Holland diverted world trade from Antwerp to Amsterdam by closing the Scheldt, Rembrandt entered the supreme heights of his art. Then France and especially England resisted the Dutch mercantile supremacy and seized New Amsterdam in 1664, while nepotism and complacency weakened the great trading companies from within. By this time Holland had declined into a depression that explains the poverty of Rembrandt's final years.

The Dutch merchants, like the Venetians, realized that happy people make good business, and so invested part of their riches to buy tranquillity with almshouses and orphanages, old people's homes and churchly works. Prudent benevolence did much of the work of a great religion, but spirituality was still another matter. For the appraising managers of affairs, the Dutch painters supplied landscapes, city views, single and group portraits, buffets of fruit and fish, pictures of nice people enjoying themselves conservatively and not-at-all-nice people brawling in taverns, but few painted Biblical scenes—except Rembrandt. Rembrandt's persistence in painting, drawing, and etching certain events in the Bible is one of the most individual obstinacies of his headstrong genius. What started him deviating from his countrymen? Was it his mother? Gerard Dou painted her absorbed in a Bible, and many of the Bible episodes that obsessed Rembrandt are such as a mother might tell her son, those glorifying boys and young men. Rembrandt avoided the horizon-wide spectacles that would make poor bedtime stories, such as the Gathering of Manna, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Last Judgment, and the entire Apocalypse. The bankruptcy inventory of his possessions listed "one old Bible" along with Josephus on the Jewish Wars, Dürer's book on human proportions, and fifteen unspecified volumes. Thirteen years later, the bare house where Rembrandt lay confined for burial contained only one book, a Bible.

*3. Self-portrait at age forty-two. Etching, fourth state, 1648. Rembrandt no longer saw himself as a pretty fellow, but owned up to his potato face. He was starting his series of supreme etchings illustrated on the following pages*



WHILE REMBRANDT may never have read the whole Bible, he read and re-read certain narratives until he lived their drama. One of his Old Testament favorites was David. The boy David, who alone of the army dared take up the challenge of single combat with the giant Goliath, must have reminded Rembrandt of his own daring to experiment against the authority of received opinion. The simple-seeming etching (Figure 4) summarizes every important aspect of the complex story. David's army is compressed into half a dozen watching eyes and one apprehensive hand. The boy, as sturdy as a steel spike, winds his slingshot around himself under the vast overhang of the conglomerate giant, a looming further enlarged by the cliffs across the valley.

Rembrandt was even more fascinated by David's sins and remorse as king of Israel. With magical delicacy of expression, he drew the prophet Nathan shaming the king for obtaining a wife by having her husband killed in battle (Figure 5).

Rembrandt felt most at home with the Bible stories that transform ordinary people through extraordinary visitations. He returned again and again to the apocryphal Book of Tobit, where an angel in disguise lends a hand with family chores. The Church of England suppressed this book, but the Reformation and Counter Reformation pictured and popularized it. It inspired the Catholic cult of the Guardian Angel. Since the Book of Tobit is a stranger to most of us who speak English, its story is worth retelling.

God saw two pious cousins in trouble and decided to help both at one go.

4 (below). *The boy David challenges the giant Goliath to single combat.*  
Etching, first state, 1654

5 (right). *The prophet Nathan shames King David for having sent Uriah to be killed in battle in order to obtain his wife Bathsheba.*  
Pen and brown ink, brown wash, and white gouache, about 1654/55





In Ecbatana young Sara was persecuted by a jealous demon who killed seven bridegrooms, one after the other, as they entered the bridal chamber. In Nineveh her cousin, old Tobit, risked his life by burying a murdered Jew who had been thrown into the street. Since he picked up the corpse too late in the evening to be purified afterward, he slept the night outdoors, where, he said, "sparrows muted warm dung into mine eyes, and a whiteness came in mine eyes."<sup>1</sup> Tobit's blindness haunted Rembrandt with the horror of the affliction that an artist must dread more than death itself (Figures 8, 9).



In his darkness Tobit asked his son Tobias to go to the city of Rages to collect an old debt. Searching for a guide on the dangerous journey, the young man met another young man, Azarias, who was really the angel Raphael sent by God to help these good people. They struck a bargain, and old Tobit blessed the travelers as they set forth with Tobias's companionable little dog (Figure 6). (Since this is the only sympathetic dog in the entire Bible, the Book of Tobit was perhaps not written by an Orthodox Jew, who would have despised dogs.)

"They came in the evening to the river Tigris and they lodged there. And when the young man [Tobias] went down to wash himself, a fish leaped out of the river, and would have devoured him. Then the angel said unto him, 'Take the fish.' And the young man laid hold of the fish, and drew it to land. To whom the angel said, 'Open the fish, and take the heart and the liver and the gall, and put them up safely.' So the young man did as the angel commanded him; and when they had roasted the fish, they did eat it:... And when they were come near to Rages, the angel said to the young man, 'Brother, today we shall lodge with Raguel, who is thy cousin; he also hath only one daughter, named Sara; I will speak for her, that she may be given thee for a wife. For to thee doth the right of her appertain, seeing thou only art of her kindred. And the maid is fair and wise....'

"Then the young man answered the angel, 'I have heard, brother Azarias,

6. Tobit blesses his departing son Tobias at the house door, while the Guardian Angel waits outside.  
Pen and brown ink, about 1645





that this maid hath been given to seven men, who all died in the marriage chamber. And now I am the only son of my father, and I am afraid, lest, if I go in unto her, I die, as the other before; for a wicked spirit loveth her, which hurteth nobody, but those which come unto her....' Then the angel said unto him,... 'When thou shalt come into the marriage chamber, thou shalt take the ashes of perfume, and shalt lay upon them some of the heart and liver of the fish, and shalt make a smoke with it: and the devil shall smell it, and flee away, and never come again any more: but when thou shalt come to her, rise up both of you, and pray to God which is merciful, who will have pity on you, and save you [ Figure 7 ]: fear not, for she is appointed unto thee from the beginning.'"<sup>2</sup>

Everything turned out as the angel had promised. After the wedding Tobias did not want to leave his bride, so he sent Azarias to Rages for the debt, and then all three returned to Nineveh. "Then said Raphael, 'I know, Tobias, that thy father will open his eyes. Therefore anoint thou his eyes with the gall, and being pricked therewith, he shall rub, and the whiteness shall fall away, and he shall see thee.' Then Anna ran forth, and fell upon the neck

*7. Tobias and his bride Sara praise God on their wedding night, while the demon flies away from the fumes of the brazier. Detail of a pen and brush drawing, about 1648-1650*





8. *Blind Tobit, drawn twice, with the dog directing his steps. Detail of a drawing, pen and brush with ink and light gray wash*



9 (above right). *Blind Tobit runs toward the sound of his son's return, upsetting a spinning wheel, while the dog tries to guide him. Etching, 1651*

of her son, and said unto him, 'Seeing I have seen thee, my son, from henceforth I am content to die.' And they wept both. Tobit also went forth toward the door and stumbled [Figure 8]: but his son ran unto him, and took hold of his father: and he strake of the gall on his father's eyes, saying, 'Be of good hope, my father.' And when his eyes began to smart, he rubbed them; and the whiteness pilled away from the corners of his eyes: and when he saw his son, he fell upon his neck. And he wept."<sup>3</sup> The Bible gives Tobias's dog nothing to do but keep Tobias company, but Rembrandt saw him as a four-legged Guardian Angel, running into the house ahead of the homecoming travelers and trying to prevent the blind father from stumbling (Figure 9).

When father and son decide to give Azarias half of the debt that he had collected for them, the angel reveals himself: "I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels, which present the prayers of the saints, and which go in and out before the glory of the Holy One.' Then they were both troubled, and fell upon their faces: for they feared. But he said unto them, 'Fear not, for it shall go well with you;... Now therefore give God thanks; for I go up to him that sent me; but write all things which are done in a book.' And when they arose, they saw him no more" (Figure 10).<sup>4</sup>

The angel Raphael, God's unrecognized guardian, prefigures Christ himself, God's disregarded redeemer. Christ's more awesome mission fascinated





Rembrandt and inspired him all his life to feel his way into every event from the Nativity to the reappearance at Emmaus. His obsession probed for implications even while other Dutch painters were turning away from Christian vision altogether. Since Rembrandt's religious paintings are almost entirely in European galleries, we illustrate the present text mostly with his drawings and etchings in this museum and the Morgan Library, and with a painting from the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge. In the drawings, made for no eye but his own, his shorthand notation, like a flash in the night, surprises us with instants of intimacy. When he etched out of his own deep prompting, he recast these secret intimations to share them with others. This confluence of private and public forces makes the etchings Rembrandt's best-known, best-loved pictures.

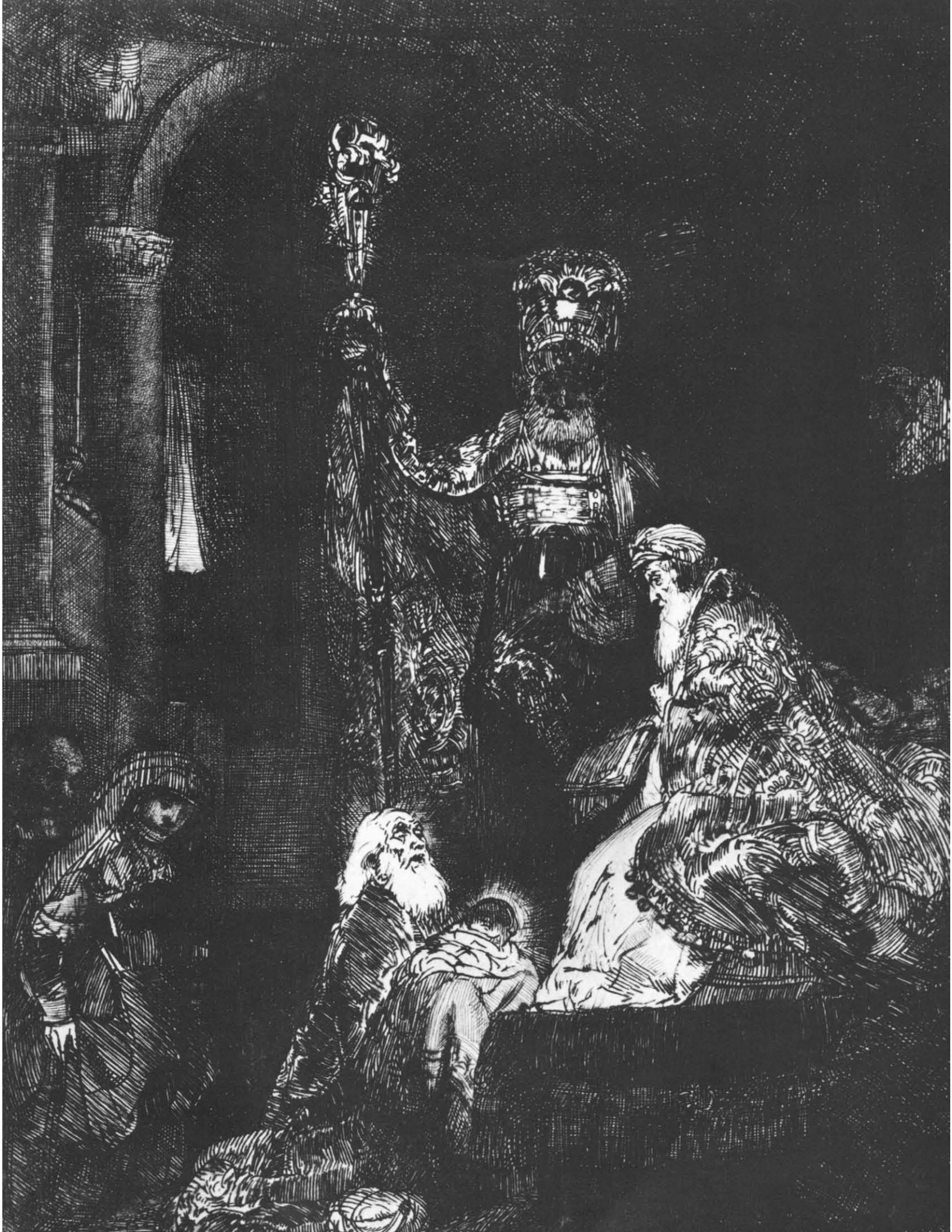
*10. The departing angel Raphael kicks his way heavenward, leaving the amazed family and the "debt" brought back by mule from Rages. Etching, first state, 1641*

REMBRANDT picked and chose among the events of the life of Christ. He cared little for the Annunciation, because the Virgin Birth contradicts the human condition. His interest began when Jesus made the divine presence visible to the shepherds by putting on destructible flesh (Figure 11). Right at the start, the newborn babe shares the incandescence of the lamp that used to assemble and comfort the family in the long ages before electricity blurred the contrast between night and day, and dimmed the moon. The child's radiance later illuminates the entire shadowy temple when old Simeon holds the babe in his arms and says, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel" (Figure 12).<sup>5</sup> Rembrandt's acid bit its most rugged lines for the nearest, most luminous objects, while he minutely hatched and scratched for the temple darkness that gave the print its French nickname *Présentation dans la Manière Noire*. This is the French expression for mezzotint, which Rembrandt never used, though it was being invented in Amsterdam in his time as a shortcut to the darkness that he got with greater labor.

11 (below). *The shepherds adore the Christ child in the manger. Etching, first state, 1654*

12 (right). *Simeon holds the Christ child in the temple. Etching in the dark manner, about 1654*



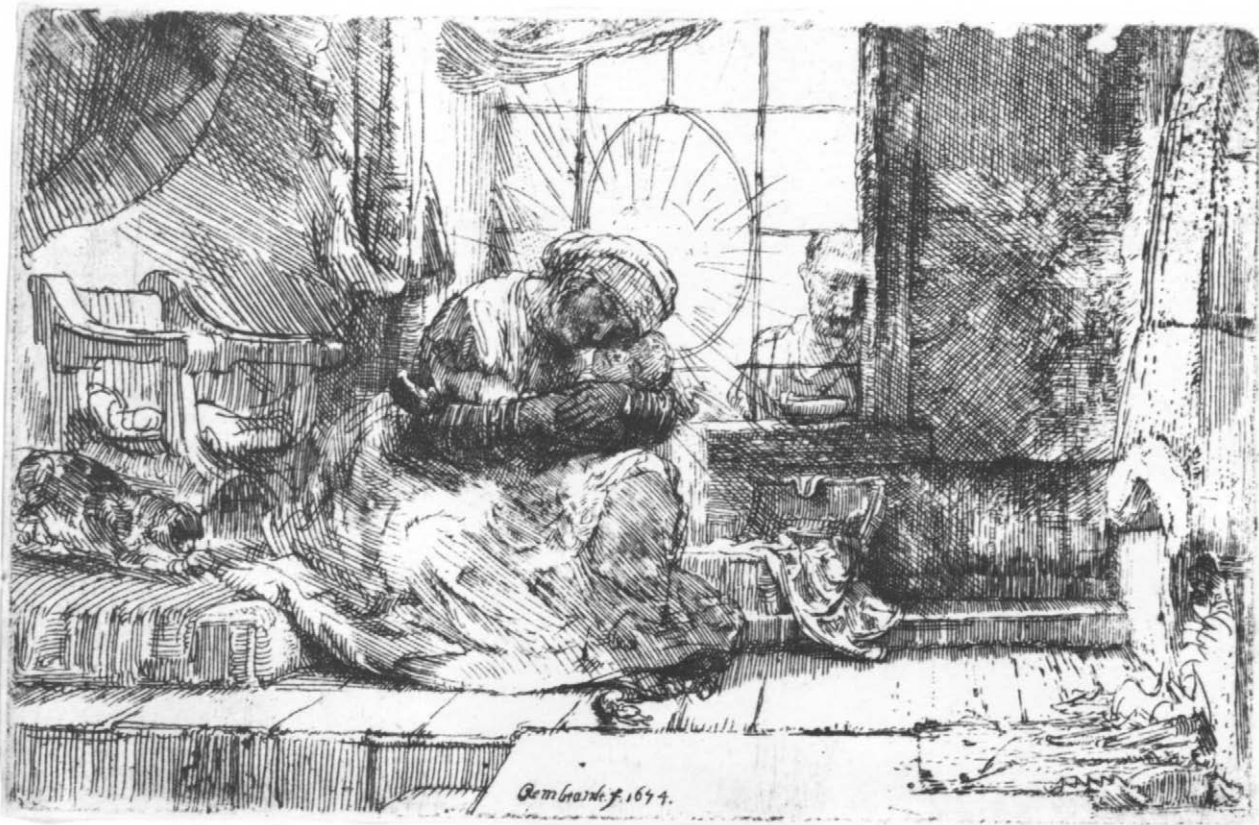






13. *The Madonna of Humility*,  
by Andrea Mantegna (1431-  
1506). Engraving, about  
1450-1455

14. *The Holy Family with a  
cat, Joseph looking in at the  
window. Etching, first state,*  
1654



Rembrandt, more than any other artist, imagined the Christ child cuddled in the warmth of his family. His love of human intimacy transformed his adaptation of Mantegna's Madonna of Humility, engraved two centuries before (Figure 13). Mantegna, starting from a marble relief by Donatello, isolated a hieratic symbol of motherhood against a blank as abstract as the gold ground of a Byzantine mosaic. Rembrandt transposed the same figures into the snugness of a room seen as a child sees it when crawling under chairs (Figure 14). The mother and her babe dissolve in a mystery of domestic twilight where a windowpane improvises a homemade halo. True originality does not consist in finding new themes, but in developing unsuspected possibilities in old ones. Rembrandt must often have seemed old-fashioned to his superficial contemporaries.



Rembrandt drew the Holy Family closest together when danger and fatigue unite them in the Flight into Egypt (Figure 15). Where most artists saw the flight as a romantic family adventure, Rembrandt realized the sodden fatigue that refugees must battle as they slog along one step ahead of death.

As Rembrandt meditated on the life of Christ, he saw similar situations develop in the life of his own family. In 1652 and 1654, about the time when his son Titus reached his twelfth birthday in September 1653, he twice etched the twelve-year-old Jesus confounding the theologians in the temple. It is not

*15. The Holy Family fleeing into Egypt. Etching, 1654*



easy to draw the small figure of a boy so that it dominates a group of grown men, the way Saint Luke describes Jesus “sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and his answers.”<sup>6</sup> In the earlier etching (Figure 16), the boy is silhouetted against the only blank space, pulling a file of men behind him in a procession that menaces the seated priests, who are made to recoil by an extraordinary device of drawing—their figures, almost void, are collapsed by a spearhead of shadow. In the later etching (Figure 17), the boy no longer lords it physically, but psychologically magnetizes every man’s scrutiny.

*16 (below). Jesus confounding the doctors in the temple. Etching, first state, 1652*

*17 (right). Jesus confounding the doctors in the temple. Etching and detail, second state, 1654*

Rembrandt continued the story to its poignant sequel when Christ’s parents found him after three days. “And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, ‘Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing’. And he said unto them, ‘How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?’ And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them. And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth.”<sup>7</sup> As the three walk (Figure 18), the boy is sure and upright between his bowed parents, the lightest figure against







the darkest background. The hands reveal the chain of dependence, for Joseph grasps Christ's, and Christ his mother's. The scurrying dog speeds the walking.

One of the few religious paintings by Rembrandt outside Europe shows Christ puzzling the woman of Samaria (Figure 19). "Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well; and it was about the sixth hour. There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water; Jesus saith unto her, 'Give me to drink.' (For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat.) Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, 'How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.' Jesus answered and said unto her, 'If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.... Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.'"<sup>8</sup> Rembrandt has set the scene in the ambiguity of dusk, the hour that the Romans described

18. *Jesus between his parents, returning from the temple. Etching, 1654*



19. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria. Oil on wood, 1655*

as being between the dog and the wolf, when the buyer at a market stall scrutinizes the goods in vain. The doubtfulness of the light favors Christ's genius for disconcerting, his unerring aim at the chink in anybody's shell. This blurring shroud of shadows was popularized in painting by Giorgione around 1500, launching a style that Rembrandt adapted from Venetian paintings that he saw in Amsterdam or owned himself. He said he had no time to waste in travel, nor did he need to go south, for he absorbed the essentials of Italian





*Below: The Pharisees. Right: Christ healing the sick. Details of Figure 20 (see pages 22-23)*

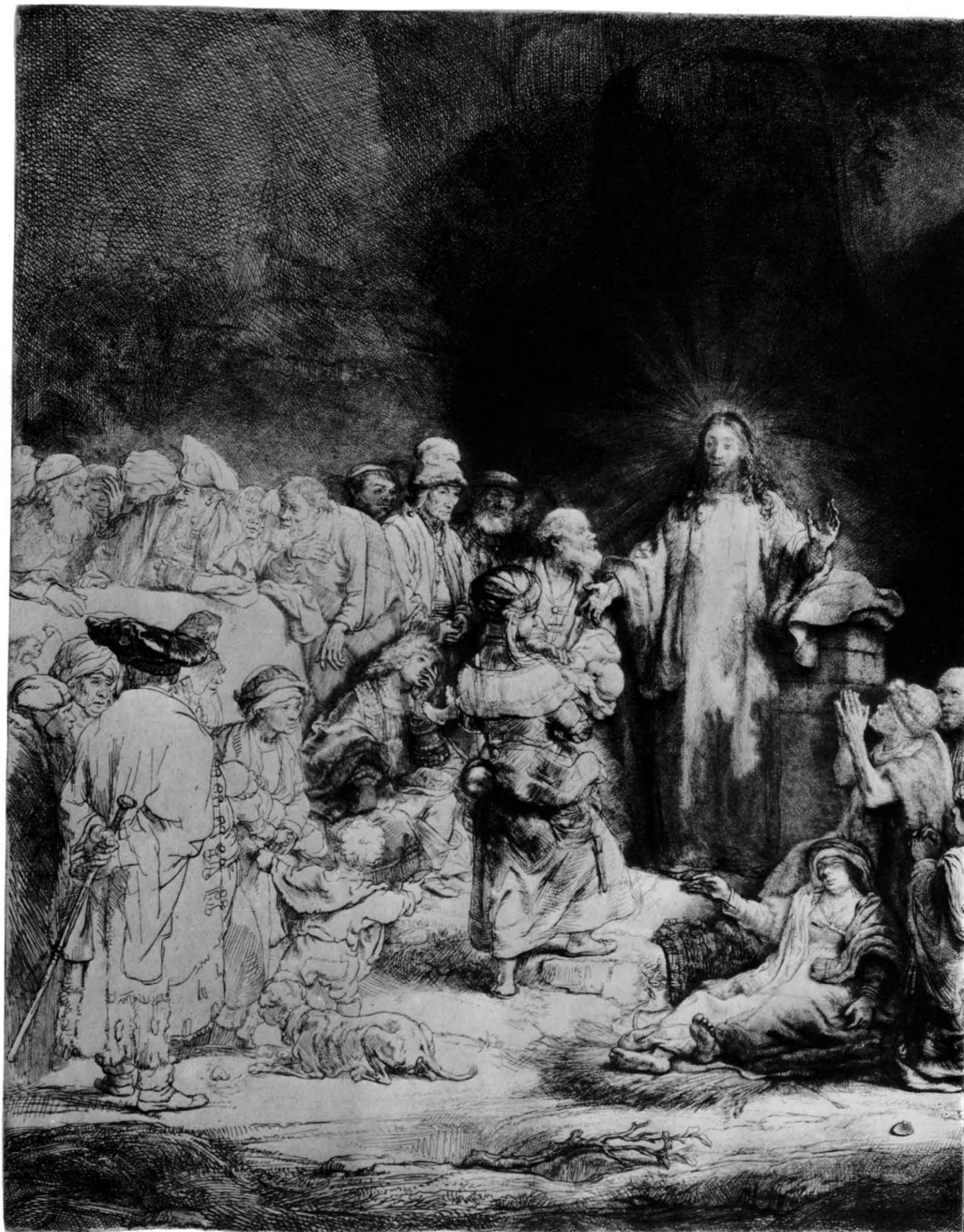
painting more profoundly than the northerners who spent years in Rome or Venice. Rembrandt's Italianism extended to his signing with his first name, in the manner of Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo, as Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann has acutely pointed out, instead of using his family name like his northern contemporaries. The saints' calendar includes no Rembrandt, but there was a Netherlandish Saint Rembert who died in 886 and whose name might have developed into Rembrandt. Though Rembrandts were uncommon, Rembrandt van Rijn was the contemporary of two Amsterdammers called Rembrandt Lubbertzoon and (horrors) Rembrandt van Ruynen.



REMBRANDT attempted to sum up all of Christ's message to the world in the Hundred Guilder Print (Figure 20). Christ is doing many things at once — healing the sick, receiving little children, rebuking the Apostles, and answering the Pharisees. His radiance suffuses the haunted and inhabited shadows



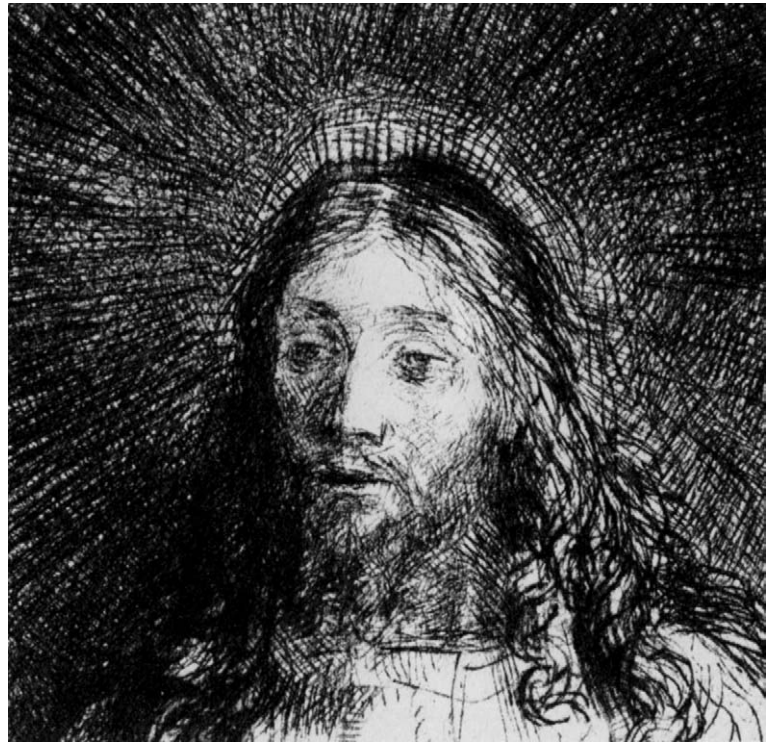
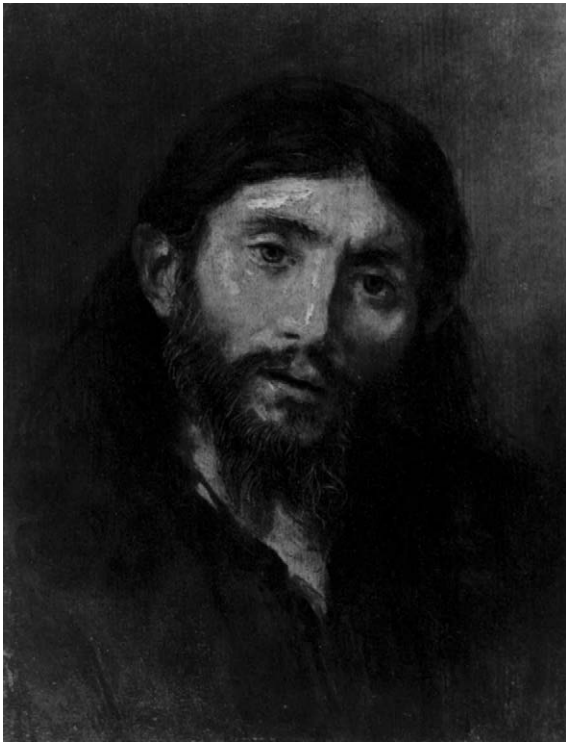








*20. Christ's Ministry,  
known as the Hundred  
Guilder Print. Etching,  
second state, about  
1649*



21. *Head of Christ, probably a study for the Hundred Guilder Print. Oil on oak panel, about 1648-1652*

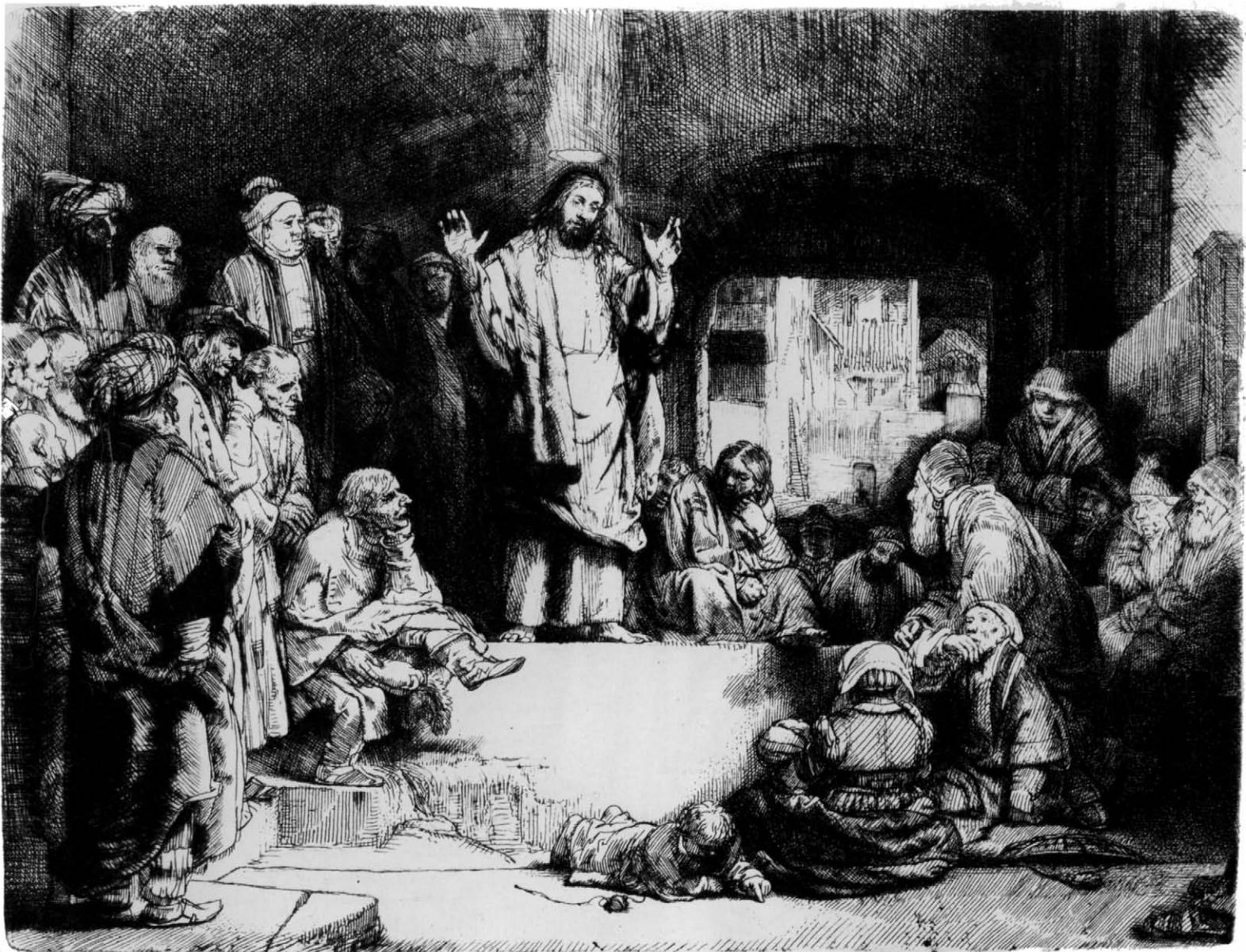
*Head of Christ in the Hundred Guilder Print (Figure 20, see pages 22-23)*

out of which the sick and the ignorant grope their way toward his illumination. As though this multiplicity were not hard enough to pull together, Rembrandt added the difficulty of dividing the picture into a light and a dark half, both of which had to be equally important. He struggled with the figure of Christ, where a magnifying glass shows that he raised the head and changed the gesture. With most unusual care, he seems to have studied the head in an oil painting (Figure 21). The thirty-eight figures in the etching may have busied Rembrandt for several years, off and on, for a number of composition studies survive, as well as the painted head of Christ; and the etching is undated. He must have worked as many weeks on this copperplate as he did on the twenty-nine figures of the *Night Watch*, where he also achieved equal emphasis for a light and a dark passage.

REMBRANDT'S prints received pet names that show how eagerly his etchings, unlike his paintings, were treasured at the very beginning. The *Hundred Guilder Print* has been famous since at least the early 1700s, when it already bore its odd nickname from a price achieved perhaps at auction. An eloquently compact print of Christ preaching has been known for centuries as *La Petite Tombe* (Figure 22), possibly because of the square block on which Christ stands, or possibly because it was handled by the Amsterdam print dealer Jacob de la Tombe. (If this was Tombe's little print, what was his big one —

the Hundred Guilder Print before it got its catchier name?) The Petite Tombe is in a later style than the Hundred Guilder Print, and it shows that Rembrandt may have become dissatisfied with the earlier, more elaborate effort of the 1640s, which had exercised and extended his technique but still lacked the unity of impact achieved in this later condensation of the subject. The Hundred Guilder Print had assembled a sampling of all mankind, milling out of impalpable darkness. In the Petite Tombe, Rembrandt then clarified and refocused the same subject by walling in his stage and grouping a selected audience in an oval adapted from Raphael's classic design for his tapestry cartoon of the Death of Ananias. Rembrandt shows Christ's message filling his hearers' hearts so brimful that no one thinks of looking at him. He accomplished a seeming impossibility: he drew the portrait of a voice.

22. *Christ Preaching, known as La Petite Tombe. Etching, about 1652*









*Left: Christ and his listeners.  
Below: A man and a child. Details  
of Figure 22 (see page 25)*





**R**EMBRANDT reached his greatest heights of imagination in the etchings of Christ's final hours. The end starts with the Last Supper (Figure 23). Rembrandt drew three copies of the Apostles in Leonardo's Last Supper, working from an old Italian engraving that adds a little dog. Did the intricate perfection of Leonardo's grouping exhaust the subject for him? Or did thirteen men at a table seem too many for intimacy and too few for an effective mass? Whatever the reason, he felt that the Passion really began with the Agony in the Gar-





den, when Jesus asked his disciples to be with him while he reconciled himself to his fate (Figure 24). “And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, saying, ‘Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done.’ And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.... And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow.”<sup>9</sup> On a copperplate no bigger than your hand, Rembrandt



23 (left). Copy after an engraving of Leonardo da Vinci's fresco of the Last Supper. Red chalk drawing, about 1635



24 (above). Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Etching, about 1657





has captured the loneliness of Christ's agony—unaware of the supporting angel—in the stormy moonlight where the arresting rabble press in at the far gate “with lanterns and torches and weapons.”<sup>10</sup>

Rembrandt's lifelong meditation on the Passion gradually transformed his entire vision. He traveled a road whose immensity shows in two prints of Christ before Pilate, made twenty years apart. They look like the work of two opposite men, for Rembrandt differs from himself even more than he differs from other artists. When he was about twenty-eight he designed the earlier etching (Figure 25) to rival Rubens in making money from a copyrighted print. But where Rubens managed his affairs astutely, Rembrandt was a business idiot and soon gave up the venture. But he aimed at the most basic appeal by turning the exhibition of Jesus into a circus. Christ stands out of doors, as Dutch prisoners had to do when they were being sentenced to die. In the darkness of the vast city below, the scrimmage of his enemies sprawls like a tragic carnival. Rembrandt prepared the print by painting the subject in grays for pupils to copy on the copperplate, leaving the head and shoulders of Christ for himself to etch. After thus flogging the obvious, Rembrandt studied Lucas of Leiden's version of the subject, engraved over a century before (Figure 26), when miracle plays were still being staged on platforms as wide as city squares. On such a platform Lucas lifted Christ and Pilate, like actors on a Greek stage, above the chorus of the priests and the rabble below. This also fits the Bible text, for Pilate presented Christ on “the Gabbatha,” actually the praetorium, which is translated as “the Pavement.” “Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, ‘Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?’... But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said unto them, ‘Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you?’ They said, ‘Barabbas.’ Pilate saith unto

25 (left). *Christ before Pilate*.  
Etching, fourth state, 1635/36

26. *Christ Presented to the People*,  
by Lucas of Leiden (1494-1533).  
Engraving, 1510





*Opposite: Christ and Pilate on the platform. This page: Onlookers. Details of Figure 27 (see pages 34-35)*

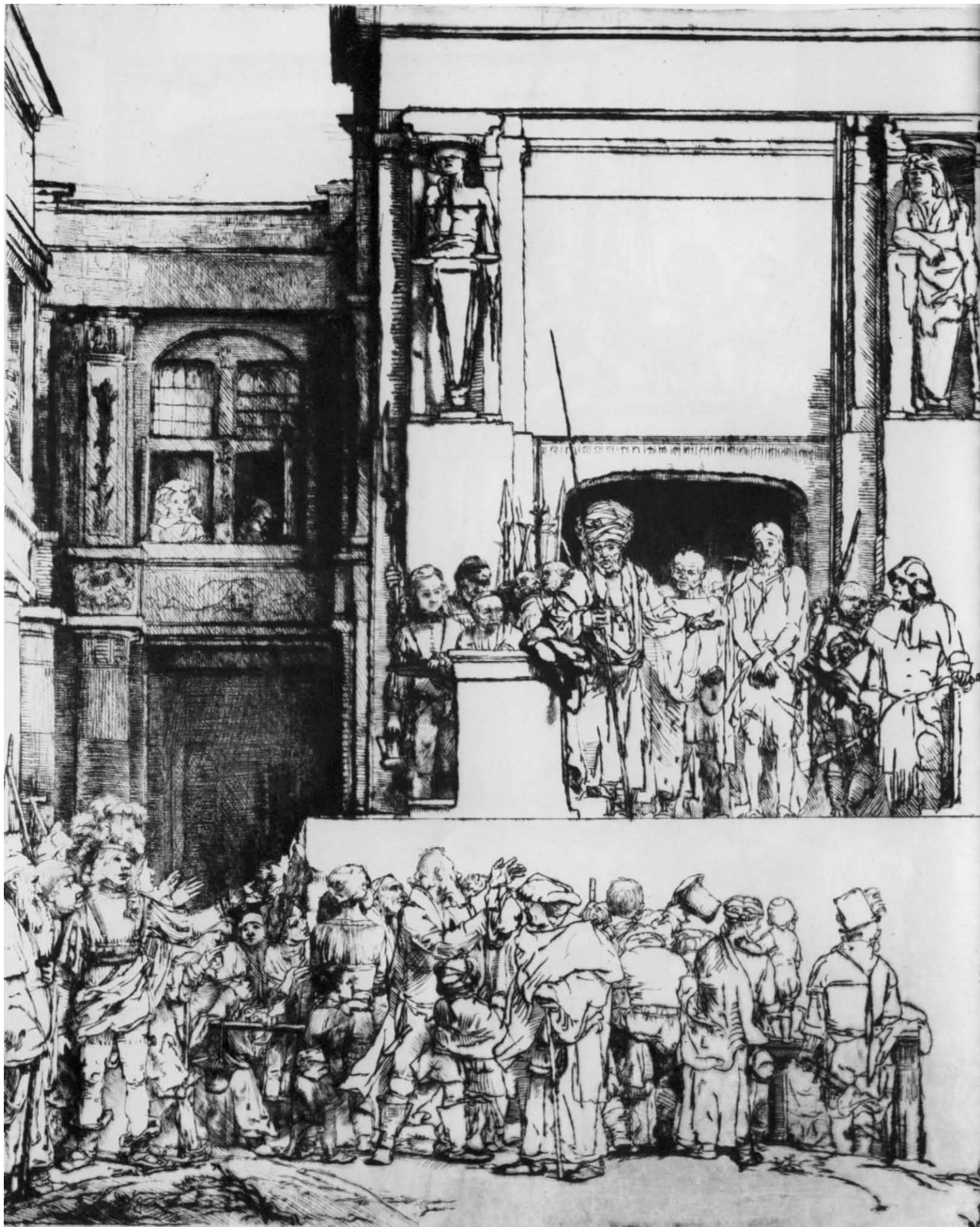


them, 'What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?' They all say unto him, 'Let him be crucified.'<sup>11</sup> When Rembrandt was forty-nine he had meditated for twenty years on this dialogue between Pilate upon the pavement and the crowd below, and he thought about Lucas of Leiden's tableau. He then made his great drypoint (Figure 27), elevating Christ and Pilate on a stage even higher than Lucas's, and distinguishing the chief priests who are inciting the rabble. The onlookers fascinated him as a rank of distinct individuals whose backs alone express their passionate absorption. But his interest













*27. Christ Presented to the People.  
Drypoint, first state, 1650*



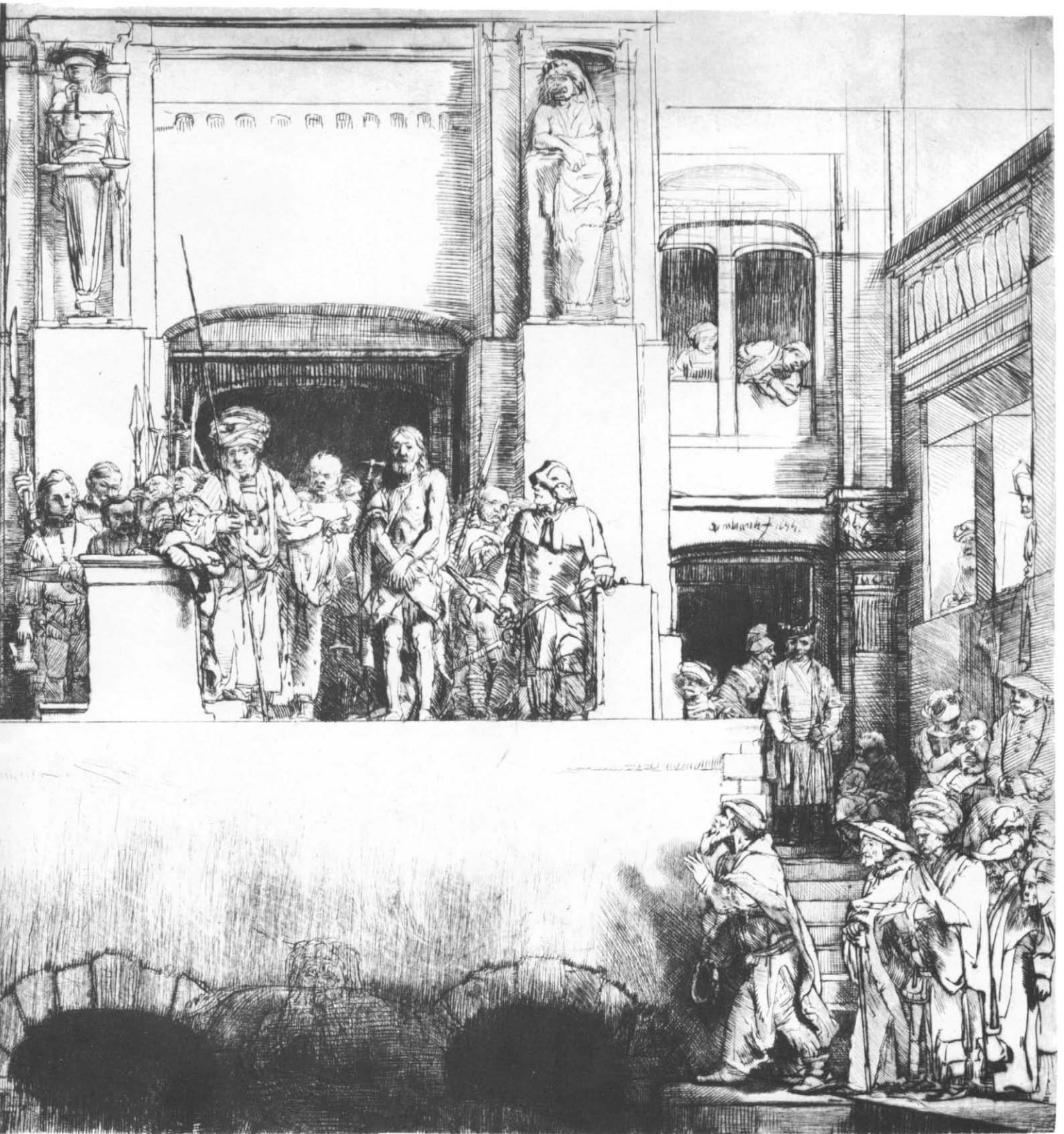
*Mother and child. Detail of  
Figure 27*

*28. Christ Presented to the People.  
Drypoint, seventh state, 1655*

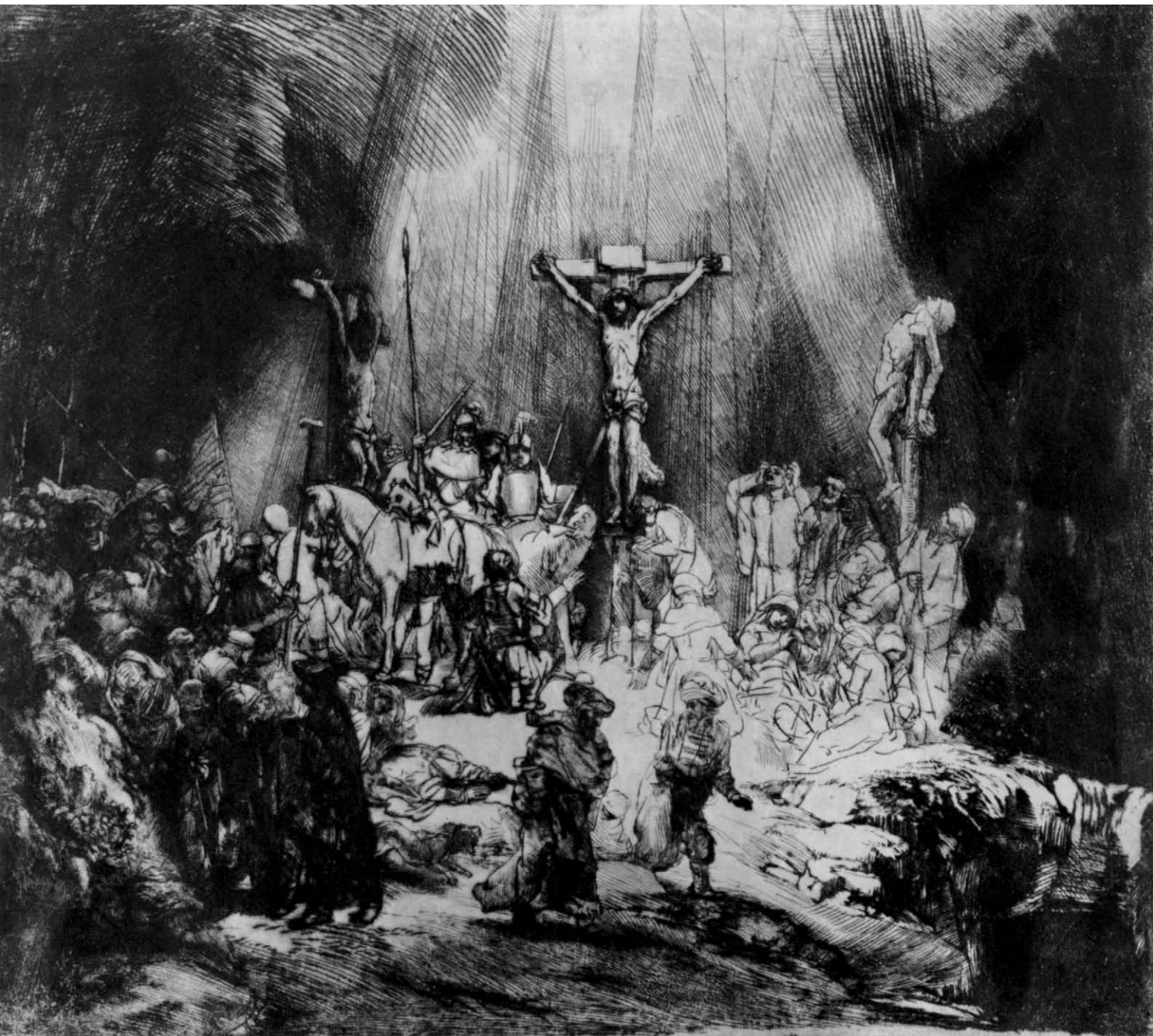
ran away with him. The line of striking personalities diverts the attention that should go to the quiet, small, intense gathering above. So Rembrandt erased this barrier group that would have made the fame of any other artist, and replaced his astonishing invention with the two plain openings of the dungeons for Christ and Barabbas (Figure 28). He suddenly puts opera glasses to our eyes, pulls us, now forcibly involved, into the central drama. He perfects the dualism of the event by opposing the chief priests and the rabble, Christ and Barabbas, godhead and mankind. The courage of the sacrifice gives the measure of Rembrandt's greatness. Only a professional artist dares throw out a brilliant passage to unify the whole work. An amateur is afraid to delete for fear he will do worse the next time, but a professional strikes out anything whatsoever, knowing that he may spoil the second or third try, but assured that on the eighth, ninth, or tenth attempt he is bound to do much better.

*Head of Barrabas. Detail (much enlarged) of Figure 27 (see pages 34-35)*



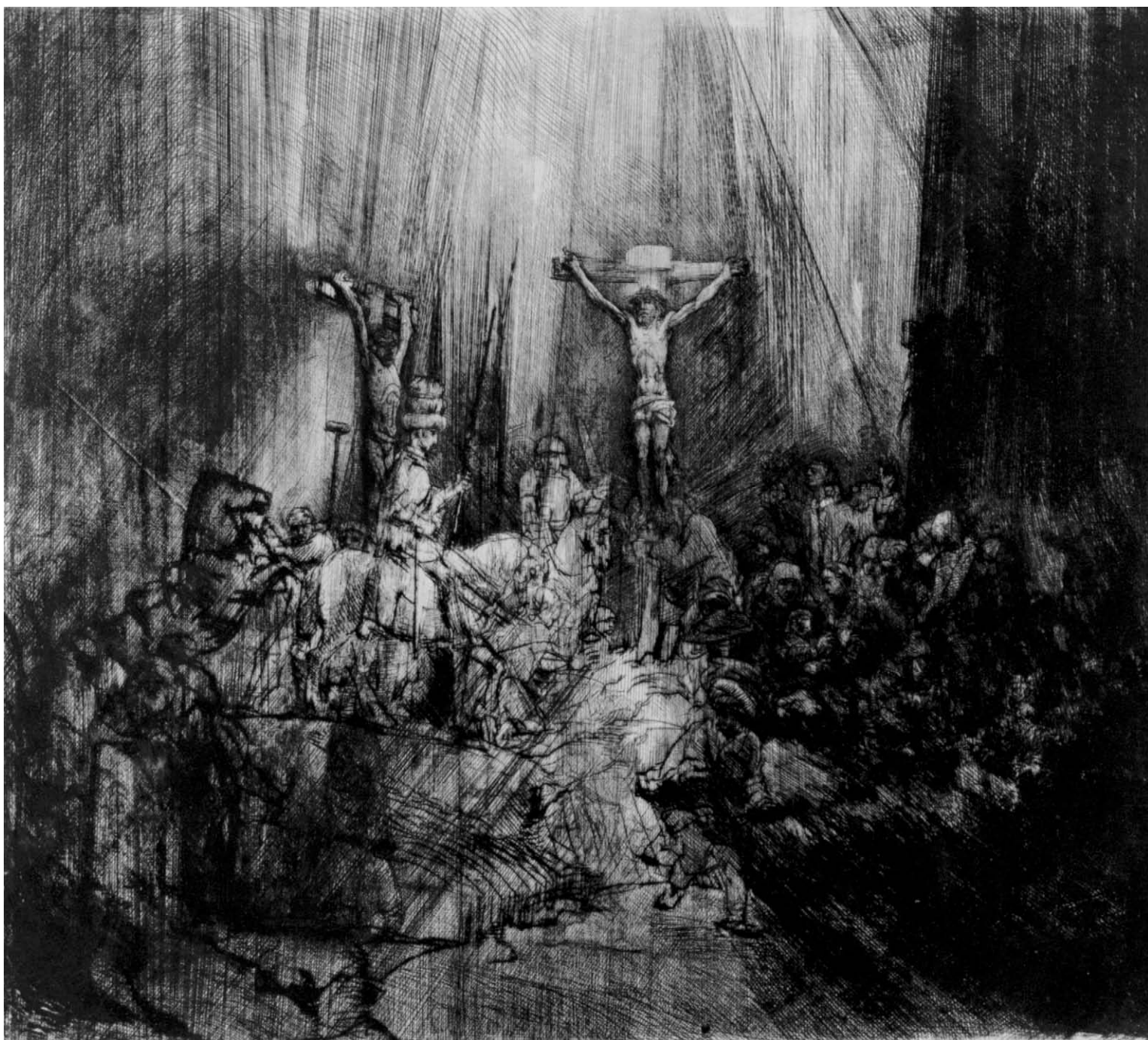






29. *The Three Crosses*. Drypoint, second state, 1653. Impression on vellum

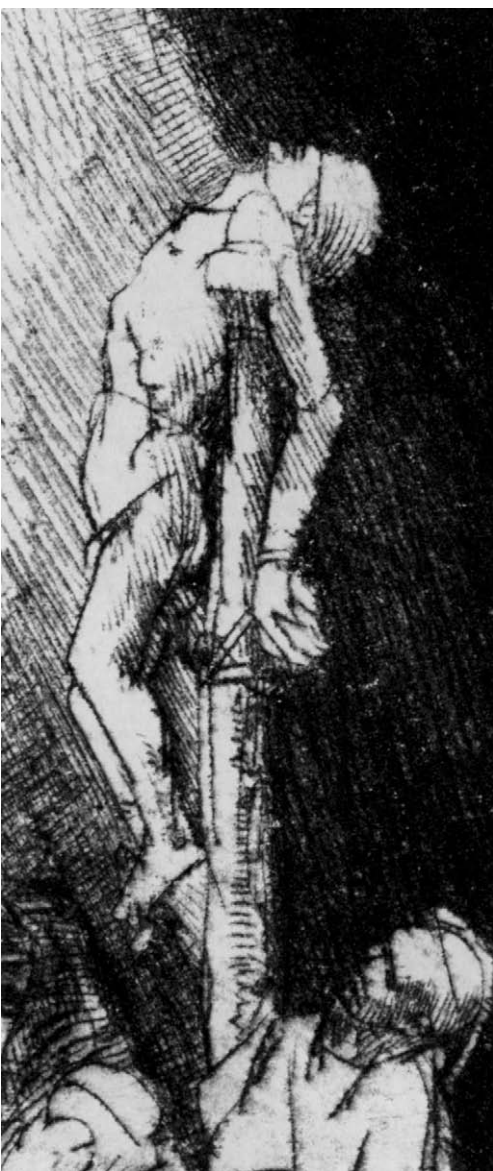
**T**WO YEARS EARLIER Rembrandt had already concluded the Passion with another huge copperplate, of the Three Crosses (Figure 29). By gathering mankind to witness the death of Christ, he approached the baroque mass spectacles, but suggested a world catastrophe with much fewer people. The various states of the print show how he labored by erasing figures and replacing them with others, and finally, possibly years later, he shifted the time to



the very end of Christ's agony (Figure 30). "And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit': and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, 'Certainly this was a righteous

*30. The Three Crosses. Drypoint, fourth state, 1653*

*Right: Mourners. Opposite: Saint John and the Virgin. Below: The bad thief. Details of Figure 29 (see page 38)*



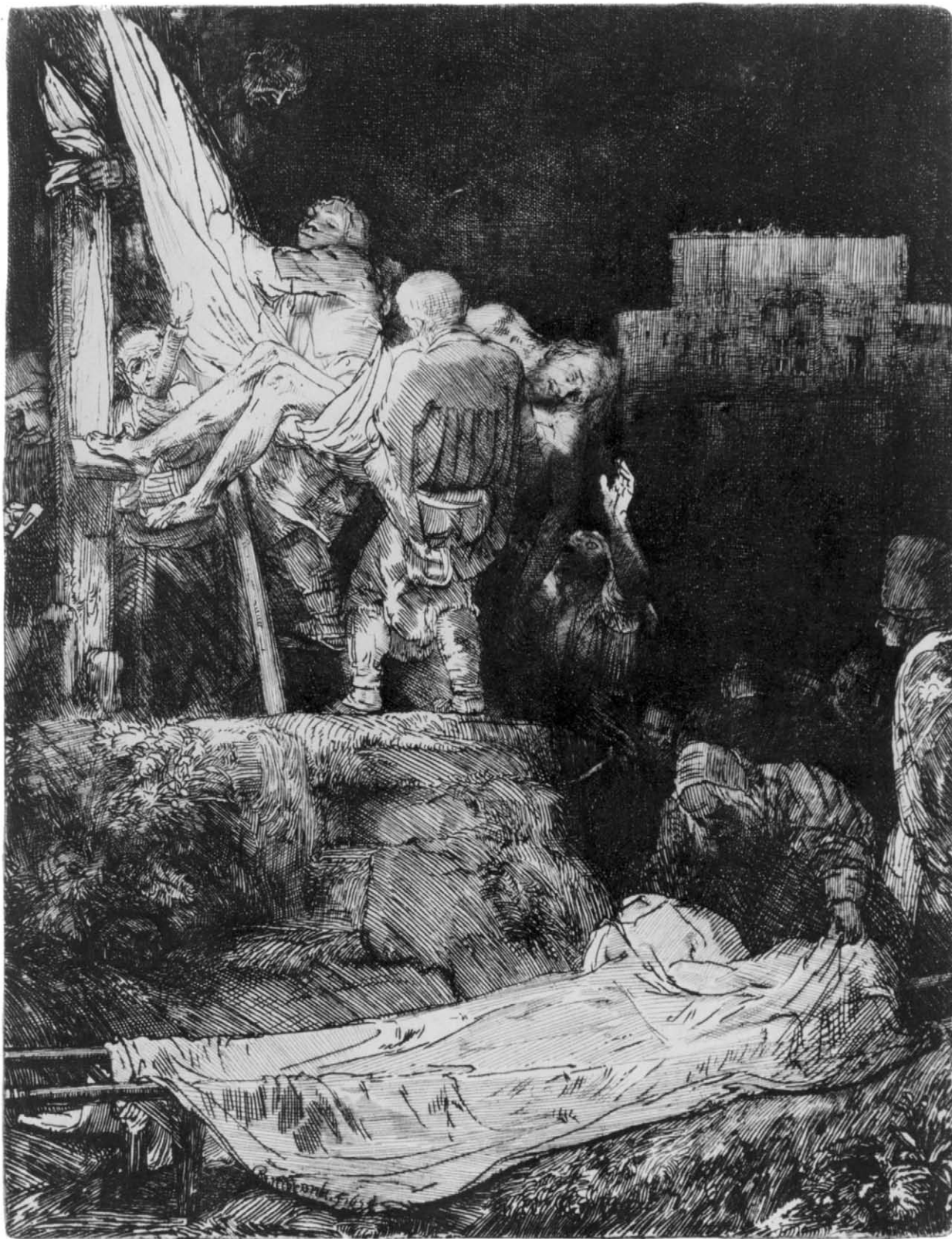
man.”<sup>12</sup> To transform the scene into the final confusion, Rembrandt harrowed the copper with a drypoint needle that blacked out the groups on which he had worked so hard in order to focus everything on Christ and the centurion.

In these two copperplates made at the height of his powers as an etcher, Rembrandt revised more ruthlessly than in any previous work, as though his mastery of tool and eye had not made creation a bit easier. Technically, he eased the way for making such drastic alterations by changing from etching the copper with acid to attacking the metal directly with a drypoint needle. Revisions had been more laborious in his earlier etching method, where he protected the metal with an acid-proof varnish through which he scratched lines to let the acid eat grooves into the metal. To replace a passage in this technique you have to scrape away the metal, burnish the bare spot until it is mirror bright, apply a new varnish ground, and etch all over again with acid. Rembrandt became too impatient for this roundabout chore when he reached his later forties, and so changed to using a stout drypoint needle to score the copper without removing metal, as the needle, like a plow, throws up ragged ridges on each side of the groove. The slipping, sticking, obstinate needle demands a muscular hand mastered by a vision of absolute exactitude. When he sat on the ground to drypoint a landscape, he needed one hand to steady the copperplate on his knee while the other pulled the drypoint needle in short scratches, mostly straight, some simply bent. But the big plates of Christ Presented and the Three Crosses were fixed to a studio table, freeing both hands to guide the needle in masterpieces of intricate detail, where the tiniest heads magnify into astounding monuments. Rembrandt's concentration on overall effect makes one forget that he could work as minutely as an engraver of gems.





31. *Christ taken down from the Cross. Etching, 1654*





32 (right). *Christ carried to the tomb.*  
Etching, about 1645. Above: Detail  
of Saint John

AFTER CHRIST had died on the Cross, “Joseph of Arimathea, an honourable counsellor, which also waited, went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus, . . . and he gave the body to Joseph.”<sup>13</sup> Rembrandt’s *Descent from the Cross* (Figure 31) starts where Rubens started it in his great painting in Antwerp, at the top of the long suspended linen, which spreads wide where Joseph and the disciples struggle with the dead body, then drops to the edge of the terrace, and drops at last to the waiting bier. Nothing delays the descent except a single hand rising out of the night. One torch glows against the winding sheet, secluding the rescuers from the surrounding dark.

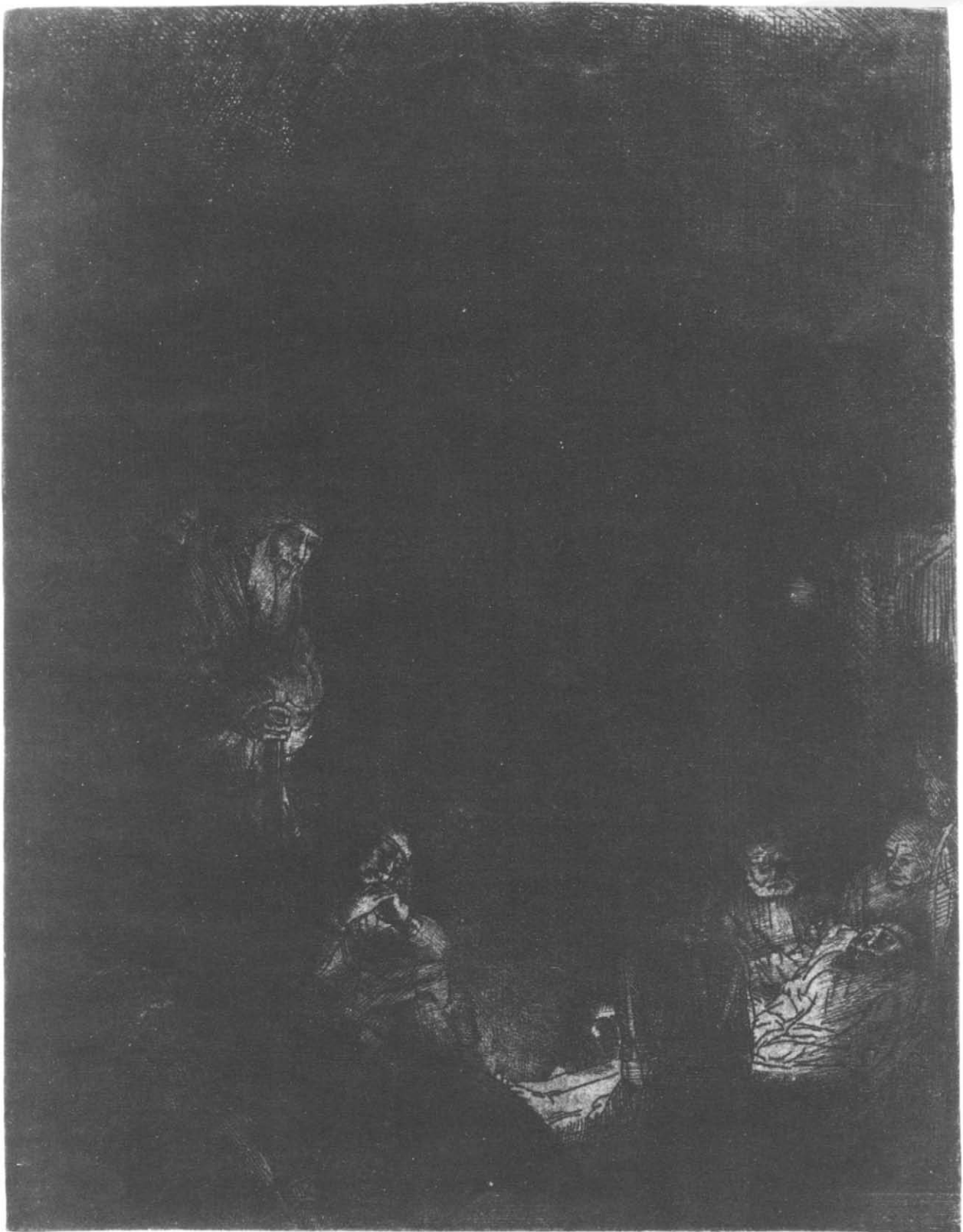
After the night of despair the morning breaks clear when the exhausted remnant of the faithful carry the wreckage of their hopes for burial (Figure 32). The lonely mourners have finally shaken off the rabble, leaving the last scoffers to boo and jeer far away, like banal music played offstage during a tragic scene. The sorrow of the group draws to a quiet focus in the crushed expression of young Saint John. Then the group leaves the sunlight for the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea laid the body “in a sepulchre that was hewn



33. *Christ laid in the tomb.*  
*Pure etching, first state, about 1654*



34. *Christ laid in the tomb. Etching printed with a surface tint, second state, about 1654*



in stone, wherein never man before was laid" (Figure 33)!<sup>14</sup> Here Rembrandt for once deviated from the Bible by placing two skulls in what the text describes as Joseph's "own new tomb."<sup>15</sup> Widely spaced-out lines and a single strong bite of acid depict the sweating, dank rock and the depths of descent into the tomb. Just such bold, clear lines must underlie the prints of velvety darkness like the Presentation in the Temple (Figure 12), later overlaid with a profound yet penetrable shadow made with the graver and the drypoint needle. In several impressions of this Entombment, Rembrandt took a shortcut by leaving a rich film of ink on the plate, wiping it here and there with the utmost sureness (Figure 34). He was able to develop his exact scale of light and dark because he was, if not perhaps quite color-blind, at least lacking the color sense of painters like Vermeer or Monet. Seeing the world more or less in browns freed him to calibrate luminosity with a delicacy as expressive as any palette of colors. This is another reason for the success of his etchings.

### 35. *The Supper at Emmaus. Etching, 1654*

**A**FTER THE DISCIPLES found that the tomb was empty, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus. "And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. . . . And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, 'Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.' And he went in to tarry with them. And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight."<sup>16</sup> Rembrandt shied away from the Last Supper because it gathered too many people for intimacy, and yet not enough to represent all mankind assembled for something like the Crucifixion. But the Supper at Emmaus, the Last Supper's ghostly afterimage, inspired him to drawings, paintings, and etchings (Figure 35). He felt entirely at home in the snugness of the evening at the country inn, where the two disciples are transformed by finding themselves in the spiritual presence of Jesus that vanished almost before they realized what they had seen. This situation provided all the elements that Rembrandt needed for his profoundest inspirations.





*Opposite: Detail of Figure 28, with Rembrandt's signature on the lintel of the doorway (see pages 36-37)*

FRONTISPIECE:  $8\frac{5}{16} \times 6\frac{5}{8}$  inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.107.25

1.  $4\frac{3}{8} \times 5\frac{15}{16}$  inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.107.16
2.  $19\frac{1}{2} \times 22$  inches. Private collection
3.  $6\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{8}$  inches. The Sylmaris Collection, Gift of George Coe Graves, 20.46.12
4.  $5\frac{1}{16} \times 3$  inches. Rogers Fund, 17.31.10
5.  $7\frac{5}{16} \times 10$  inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.100.934
6.  $6 \times 10\frac{1}{2}$  inches. The Pierpont Morgan Library
7.  $6\frac{7}{8} \times 9\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Rogers Fund, 06.1042.2
8.  $10\frac{1}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{16}$  inches. Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.1.802
9.  $6\frac{5}{16} \times 5\frac{1}{16}$  inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 37.3.13
10.  $4\frac{1}{16} \times 6\frac{1}{16}$  inches. The Pierpont Morgan Library
11.  $4\frac{1}{8} \times 5\frac{1}{8}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.59
12.  $8\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.16
13.  $9\frac{1}{8} \times 9\frac{3}{16}$  inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 52.535
14.  $3\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{11}{16}$  inches. Gift of Henry Walters, by exchange, 23.51.5
15.  $3\frac{13}{16} \times 5\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.45
16.  $4\frac{15}{16} \times 8\frac{7}{16}$  inches. Rogers Fund, 19.19.2
17.  $4\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.48
18.  $3\frac{13}{16} \times 5\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.107.7
19.  $24\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Bequest of Lillian S. Timken, 1959, 60.71.14
20.  $10\frac{7}{8} \times 15\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.107.35
21.  $10 \times 7\frac{7}{8}$  inches. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Gift of William A. Coolidge, 1964.172
22.  $6\frac{1}{16} \times 8\frac{1}{8}$  inches. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.107.18
23.  $14 \times 18\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.1.794
24.  $4\frac{5}{16} \times 3\frac{5}{16}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.15
25.  $21\frac{5}{8} \times 17\frac{5}{8}$  inches. Gift of Henry Walters, 17.37.75
26.  $11\frac{3}{8} \times 17\frac{15}{16}$  inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 27.54.4
27.  $15\frac{1}{8} \times 17\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.34
28.  $13\frac{3}{4} \times 17\frac{15}{16}$  inches (cut to plate line). Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.36
29.  $15 \times 17\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.31
30.  $15 \times 17\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.33
31.  $8\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{7}{16}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg, 17.14
32.  $5\frac{3}{16} \times 4\frac{5}{16}$  inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 23.16.2
33.  $8\frac{5}{16} \times 6\frac{5}{16}$  inches. The Sylmaris Collection, Gift of George Coe Graves, 20.46.17
34.  $8\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{5}{16}$  inches. Gift of Henry Walters, by exchange, 23.51.7
35.  $8\frac{5}{16} \times 6\frac{5}{8}$  inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.58

The following references are from the Authorized King James Versions of the Apocrypha of the Old Testament, and of the Holy Bible:

1. Tob. 2:10; 2. Tob. 6:1-17; 3. Tob. 11:7-14; 4. Tob. 12:15-21; 5. Luke 2:29-32; 6. Luke 2:46-47; 7. Luke 2:48-51; 8. John 4:6-14; 9. Luke 22:42-45; 10. John 18:3; 11. Matt. 27:17-23; 12. Luke 24:44-47; 13. Mark 15:43-45; 14. Luke 23:53; 15. Matt. 27:60; 16. Luke 24:15-31

Rembrandt 1694.







*Detail of Figure 28*

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