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## A Calvinist view of visual art in seventeenth-century Holland : the iconography of Esther in post-Reformation Dutch painting

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A CALVINIST VIEW OF VISUAL ART IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY HOLLAND:  
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF ESTHER IN POST-REFORMATION DUTCH PAINTING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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in

The School of Art

by  
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B.A., Belhaven University, 2011  
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To Jamie Peaster, my father, for instilling in me a love of this subject and all things history, and to the rest of my family for their never-ending encouragement and wisdom.

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## ABSTRACT

The Book of Esther, found in the Old Testament, has been represented in a variety of ways throughout history. In a sweeping tale of love, honor, and sacrifice, the Jewish maiden queen, Esther, is a heroine to the oppressed. Dutch Protestants in the Golden Age felt a kinship to this subject, particularly after the Protestant Reformation and the new religious freedom gained in Holland during the sixteenth century, which continued in the seventeenth century. These men and women saw many parallels between Esther's experience and their own, both as the covenant people of God and as the remnant preserved by God's care. By looking at the history of the Protestant Reformation, the religious climate of Holland, and a number of representations of the Book of Esther, this paper aims to explore the connection between Dutch Protestantism and the Old Testament Jews, the importance of the Book of Esther for Dutch Protestants in the seventeenth century, and the way in which artists represented Esther in Post-Reformation Holland.

## CHAPTER 1: HISTORY AND EFFECTS OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

The Protestant Reformation was the pivotal turning point in the paradigm shift from the religious unity of the Middle Ages to the religiously independent modern era in Northern Europe. Initially, the Reformation was an attempt to “reform,” or redefine, the traditions and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Because the Roman Catholic Church was the platform on which most political, economic, and social issues were based, as well as the only rule of faith and practice in religious matters, the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century prompted an almost universal upheaval in the understanding of religious and social norms. This newfound freedom was both the cause and result of an educated, determined middle class and was closely followed by the appearance of thriving new cities and markets across Europe.

The principal catalyst for the Reformation was the German reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546). A former monk, Luther waged war against the lethargy and corruption of medieval Roman Catholicism by nailing a detailed and numbered complaint to his local church door. The tale of Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg on All Saints Day, October 31, 1517, has become one of the most significant and storied events in church history.<sup>1</sup>

Luther remained at times a crass man, even when fighting to maintain the integrity of the Church. After an accident in a field when he was privy to a firsthand

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<sup>1</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, New York: Viking, 2004, 14.

view of the death of a friend by lightning strike, Luther left his pursuit of civil law and joined a monastery. There he was one of the extreme personalities who considered holiness a virtue attained only through suffering, and he habitually engaged in self-harming practices such as flagellation and the donning of animal-skin undergarments which tore at his flesh day and night. Reading a copy of the Latin Vulgate, he became convinced that his way of life was antithetical to that called for by the Scriptures and subsequently left the monastery after taking the vows of priesthood. He was aided by an Augustinian convent and came to believe in the concept of free grace, the idea of justification by faith alone found in the writings of Paul. Luther, a professor and theologian, was given the opportunity to plead the case of some of his brothers in front of the Pope and his court in Rome and after returning to the University in Wittenberg continued teaching the doctrines of this new religion.<sup>2</sup>

Though credit is undoubtedly due to the fiery monk, there was also a series of events and personalities leading up to the formal rebellion against the religious monopoly of the Church.<sup>3</sup> Some of the important players in Protestant history prior to the event of the Reformation include John Wycliffe (1328-1384) and Jan Hus (1369-1415), both of whom directly or indirectly influenced Martin Luther. Wycliffe was an English-born translator, reformer, and teacher in the fourteenth century who diligently

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<sup>2</sup> John Foxe and William Byron Forbush, *Fox's Book of Martyrs: A History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Early Christian and the Protestant Martyrs*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1967, 48.

<sup>3</sup> The "Church" in this context refers to the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, led by various popes, as opposed to the "Holy Catholic Church," which refers to all Christians across the world, unified under one corporal head, Jesus Christ. For more information, see J. N. D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986.



attacked what he thought to be corruption in the Church during his day. The most significant of Wycliffe's accomplishments was the translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate to vernacular English in 1382. This translation is commonly known as Wycliffe's Bible, though scholars agree that much of the Old Testament was translated by either his colleagues or followers. Wycliffe was also highly concerned with the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences, the lack of morality and intellectual acumen found in ordained priests, pilgrimages, and the excessive veneration of saints. His attack on the doctrine of transubstantiation<sup>4</sup> and his adherence to the Bible as the sole authority of Christian doctrine resulted in the subsequent formation of a group of followers known as the Lollards, who claimed these doctrines as their own. The Lollard movement is considered a precursor to the Protestant Reformation, and Wycliffe himself has been dubbed the "The Morning Star of the Reformation."<sup>5</sup>

The other significant character in the Protestant movement before that of the Reformation was a Bohemian priest, Jan Hus. Hus was born in the late fourteenth century and was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1415. His death resulted in the Hussite Wars in Bohemia from 1419 to 1434 in which his followers carried out military action against the Bohemian Romanists, though the conclusion of the wars was undecided. Hus closely followed the teaching and writing of Wycliffe and even

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<sup>4</sup> "The doctrine held by Roman Catholics, that the bread and wine in the Mass is converted into the body and blood of Christ; - distinguished from consubstantiation, and impanation." See Gavin LaRowe and Mark Olsen, *ARTFL Project: Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1913 Edition*, MICRA, Inc., n.d.

<sup>5</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Reformation*, New York: Harper One, 2010, 342-349.

translated Wycliffe's treatise *Trialogus* into Czech, giving his native people an opportunity to read the doctrines he held dear. His own work, *De Ecclesia*, was modeled after Wycliffe's writings. Like Wycliffe, Hus believed in predestination,<sup>6</sup> that the Bible was the ultimate authority of faith and doctrine, and that Jesus Christ was the head of the Church, not earthly officials such as popes.<sup>7</sup> Though the Reformation would probably not have been possible prior to Martin Luther's forthright act of rebellion in 1517, the popularity of the movement was largely due to those who preached the doctrines of the Reformation years before Luther espoused them.<sup>8</sup>

The figure most often associated with the holistic theology of the Protestant Reformation is John Calvin (1509-1564). A contemporary of Martin Luther, Calvin was a French-born reformer, writer, and theologian who was forced to flee his homeland because of religious persecution and eventually settled in Geneva in 1536. Years younger than Luther, Calvin was reputed to be the more level-headed of the two, though even more radical in his ideas of Church reform. He was the founder of a system of church government now known as the Presbyterian system,<sup>9</sup> which he implemented at the churches in Geneva. He was an advocate of singing Psalms as part of the worship service and the adherence to a high moral standard overseen by pastors

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<sup>6</sup> "The purpose of God from eternity respecting all events; especially, the preordination of men to everlasting happiness or misery." See LaRowe and Olsen, *ARTFL Project*.

<sup>7</sup> William Roscoe Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986, 68-77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> "Of or pertaining to a presbyter, or to ecclesiastical government by presbyters; relating to those who uphold church government by presbyters; also, to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of a communion so governed." See LaRowe and Olsen, *ARTFL Project*.

and elders in the community, as well as the teaching of catechism and the confession of faith to the children of the congregation. The entire city of Geneva became, for all intents and purposes, reformed under the tutelage of John Calvin.<sup>10</sup>

Calvin was inspiring not only in his personal interactions and teaching as seen in Geneva, but also in his written work that was spread throughout Europe. His writing was tremendously influential on the Scottish reformer John Knox (1514-1572), who established Calvinistic Protestantism as the national religion of Scotland in the mid-sixteenth century. Originally written to encourage the persecuted Christians in France, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* remains one of the foremost theological works in Protestant history. As in the work of Luther and Wycliffe, the Apostle's Creed<sup>11</sup> formed the backbone of Calvin's *Institutes*, and he was careful to avoid theological discrepancies as well as he could.<sup>12</sup> He gave a systematic presentation of the Christian faith, addressing issues from worship style to sacraments. If an issue was not directly addressed in the work, it was, and is, usually possible to infer from the text what the correct view, according to the Bible and interpreted by Calvin, would be. Calvin's view of art and nature as written in the

*Institutes* is an excellent example of the directness with which he addressed the

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<sup>10</sup> Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 230-234.

<sup>11</sup> "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen." See Apostles' Creed, *The Creed, the Lord's Prayer & the Ten Commandments*, 1848.

<sup>12</sup> Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 229.

reader, as well as the theological assertions that rejected the Roman Catholic tradition of venerating icons and altarpieces:

I am not, however, so superstitious as to think that all visible representations of every kind are unlawful. But as sculpture and painting are gifts of God, what I insist for is, that both shall be used purely and lawfully, - that gifts which the Lord has bestowed upon us, for his glory and our good, shall not be preposterously abused, nay, shall not be perverted to our destruction. We think it unlawful to give a visible shape to God, because God himself has forbidden it, and because it cannot be done without, in some degree, tarnishing his glory. And lest any should think that we are singular in this opinion, those acquainted with the productions of sound divines will find that they have always disapproved of it. If it be unlawful to make any corporeal representation of God, still more unlawful must it be to worship such a representation instead of God, or to worship God in it. The only things, therefore, which ought to be painted or sculptured, are things which can be presented to the eye; the majesty of God, which is far beyond the reach of any eye, must not be dishonored by unbecoming representations. Visible representations are of two classes, viz., historical, which give a representation of events, and pictorial, which merely exhibit bodily shapes and figures. The former are of some use for instruction or admonition. The latter, so far as I can see, are only fitted for amusement. And yet it is certain, that the latter are almost the only kind which have hitherto been exhibited in churches. Hence we may infer, that the exhibition was not the result of judicious selection, but of a foolish and inconsiderate longing. I say nothing as to the improper and unbecoming form in which they are presented, or the wanton license in which sculptors and painters have here indulged...I only say, that though they were otherwise faultless, they could not be of any utility in teaching.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of Calvinism was not limited to worship styles and theological debate. Because Calvin believed in the redemption of the whole man, body and soul, in Christ, the results were visible in various sectors of life. Socially, Calvinism

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Geneva, 1545), vol. I, chap. XI, para. 12 (ed. J.-D. Benoit [Paris, 1957]), 135.

affected the climate by encouraging an educated class of people who were not born into nobility to learn to read, write, and to hold fast to the truths in Scripture.

Economically, Calvinism is most often viewed as synonymous with the birth of capitalism in Europe. The work ethic produced by the followers of Calvin in Holland, Germany, and France aided the economic revival occurring in towns and cities across the face of Northern Europe. Max Weber, in his famous and influential book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, claims that the development of the idea of a “calling” – formed from a formerly immoral activity and changed into an ethical imperative for the sake of God and profit – can only be attributed to the religious movement of Calvinism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> This positive idea of “calling” has been further explored by scholarship in more recent years, leading one author, Christen T. Jonassen, to say this about Calvinism and the spirit of capitalism:

The concept of Calvinism created a disciplined body of workers whose every act was under divine scrutiny and who labored for the glory of God and their own salvation beyond the point where all their material needs had been met. It freed the individual from the onus attached to the accumulation of wealth and profit making. It prevented the dissipation of wealth in luxurious and wasteful living by the acceptance of men of a worldly asceticism. Out of these ingredients was created the modern phenomenon of Capitalism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Scribner, 1958, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Christen T. Jonassen, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism in Norway,” *American Sociological Review*, 12, no. 6, 1947: 676-686.

Dutch scholar Maartjen de Klijn reports accordingly, then, that the increased market for realistic paintings in Holland in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and especially the first few decades of the seventeenth century, was directly related to the theocentric view of nature and art,<sup>16</sup> as well as the Calvinistic culture of capitalism and markets in the northern Netherlands.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of the Protestant Reformation, the teaching of men like Luther and Calvin, would never have been so pervasive had not the era allowed for it. The interest in translating the Bible into the vernacular in order for laymen to have access to its contents, not solely the clergy, was a new phenomenon. The idea of engaging an educated middle class about matters of theology and religion was unheard of prior to this time. The concept that religion was no longer dependent upon an earthly mediator, regardless of class or station, and that intrinsic value was placed on a personal relationship with the God of the Bible (now available to read), was the antithesis of religion up to this point. However, none of these ideas would have been spread had it not been for Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1398-1468). Gutenberg, the final figure instrumental in the spread of Reformed doctrine, was a German goldsmith who invented movable type printing. For the first time in history, ideas could be printed, sold, and dispersed instead of being painstakingly copied by hand. Luther's *Ninety-*

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<sup>16</sup> This "theocentric view of nature and art" is simply a view that has God as the central focus. So, for art, a theocentric view would refer to the desire to reflect God's creativity in artistic production. For nature, this view would refer to the belief in God as the Creator, and that nature is a reflection of the Creator's innovation and design. For more information on this subject, see James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 16-22.

<sup>17</sup> Maartjen de Klijn, *De invloed van het Calvinisme op de Noord-Nederlandse landschapschilderkunst, 1570-1630*, Apeldoorn: Willem de Zwijgerstichting, 1982.

*Five Theses*, Calvin's *Institutes*, and the Bible itself were all printed and sold in the common languages of the people. Gutenberg's invention is credited with increased interest in the arts and sciences, as well as enabling the flood of people interested in the new ideas about theology and the Church to gain access to the material. The printing press was "an agent of change" that affected every facet of life in the following century, leading one historian to claim, "The history of printing is an integral part of the general history of civilization."<sup>18</sup> With this addition to the cause of the Reformation, the movement quickly swept through Europe, largely fueled by years of abuse under corrupt Roman Catholic clergy, and aided by a new understanding of the value of individual faith and worth.<sup>19</sup>

It would be impossible to understand the full effects of the Protestant Reformation without first understanding the views held by the Roman Catholic Church regarding worship, the veneration of icons, and the importance of the decoration of the interior of the Romanist churches, including altarpieces. As rumbles of dissent wafted through the rafters of the Roman Catholic world, the Pope addressed the issue by appointing "inquisitors" who were to deal with those in favor of reform, known as heretics. The dreaded offices of Inquisition, the most famous and horrific of which were established in Spain, searched out and found those opposing the

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<sup>18</sup> This quote from historian Sigfrid Steinberg is found in his work *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 11. It was quoted in Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's *The Printing Press As an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 5. The latter is an excellent source for further information on the printing press and its subsequent influence on society.

<sup>19</sup> John Yegge, "The Printing Press and the Protestant Reformation," *The Examiner*, Religion and Spirituality, February 6, 2010.

traditional views held by the Church. *Fox's Book of Martyrs* gives an account of the Inquisition:

When the reformed religion began to diffuse the Gospel light throughout Europe, Pope Innocent III entertained great fear for the Romish Church. He accordingly instituted a number of inquisitors, or persons who were to make inquiry after, apprehend, and punish, heretics, as the reformed were called by the papists. Courts of Inquisition were now erected in several countries; but the Spanish Inquisition became the most powerful, and the most dreaded of any. Even the kings of Spain themselves, though arbitrary in all other respects, were taught to dread the power of the lords of the Inquisition; and the horrid cruelties they exercised compelled multitudes, who differed in opinion from the Roman Catholics, carefully to conceal their sentiments.<sup>20</sup>

Roman Catholic worship, or Mass, during this time period centered around the concept of the Eucharist.<sup>21</sup> The act of taking Communion was vital to the life of the parishioner, largely due to the Catholic belief that the bread and wine physically changed form as consumed and became the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. This particular church tenet was hotly contested by the early Reformers. The reformed view of Mass and the Eucharist concluded that no clergyman should have an opinion that supersedes that of the Bible, and taking Communion is a sign and seal of God's covenant promises to His people, of His love for them, and His death for their sins.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Foxe and Forbush, *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> "The sacrament of the Lord's supper; the solemn act or ceremony of commemorating the death of our Redeemer, in the use of bread and wine, as emblems of his flesh and blood, accompanied with appropriate prayers and hymns." See LaRowe and Olsen, *ARTFL Project*.

<sup>22</sup> David Hagopian, *Romeward Bound: Evaluating Why Protestants Convert to Catholicism*, Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics: Antithesis, 1996, 2.



Another significant difference between the theology of the Roman Catholic Church and that of the early Church reformers was the concept of the veneration of Holy Saints, including the Virgin Mary. Romanists were avid collectors and appreciators of various icons, paintings, and altarpieces that depicted the lives and deaths of saints throughout the ages. These images were often objects of worship, and many were even believed to have supernatural powers. The worship of the patron saint of a town or city by venerating his or her relics or viewing an image of the person was an integral part of religious life at the turn of the sixteenth century. The reformers, Calvin in particular, strongly disagreed with this practice. The reformed view of saints stemmed from the teaching of Paul and the text of the New Testament that states that all believers are known as saints and are children of God. This idea that the God of the universe adopted sinners as His children, regardless of their status or past offenses, produced a desire to give service and devotion wholeheartedly to Him. The practice of worshipping the created, as opposed to Creator, was appalling to Calvin and his contemporaries. They viewed the worship of icons and images as an affront to the glory and majesty of God, and put a greater emphasis on the individual's relationship with Christ and the accountability of corporate worship as overseen by teachers and elders. Artistically, the emphasis was placed on the representation of Old Testament narrative and nature. Calvin also addresses the issue of images in worship in his *Institutes*:

John (1 John 5: 21) enjoins us to beware, not only of the worship of idols, but also of idols themselves. And from the fearful infatuation under which the world has hitherto laboured, almost to the entire destruction of piety, we know too well from experience that the

moment images appear in churches, idolatry has as it were raised its banner; because the folly of manhood cannot moderate itself, but forthwith falls away to superstitious worship.<sup>23</sup>

In opposition to the idea of ornate altarpieces, sculpture, and various other imagery found in Roman Catholic churches, the reformers, now known as Protestants, desired to return to a more simplistic way, both in worship and decorative style. The preaching of the Scriptures was expository in Protestant pulpits, contrasting with the rote liturgy of the Roman Mass. Post-Reformation churches were purged of all imagery except for that approved by the Session of the church,<sup>24</sup> usually resulting in almost starkly simple interiors with little to distract from the words of worship, as was the intent. One such example of this is the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam. The Protestants claimed it in 1578 and destroyed almost all of the Catholic adornment, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. Protestants did celebrate Communion, though even that was stripped of all embellishments and became a symbol of corporate unity under the federal headship of Christ as King of the Church.

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<sup>23</sup> Calvin, vol. I, chap. XI, para. 12, 135.

<sup>24</sup> “The ruling elders of each church...form, in the church to which they belong, a *bench* or *judicial court*, called among us the *church session*....This body of elders, with the pastor at their head and presiding at their meetings, forms a judicial assembly, by which all the spiritual interests of the congregation are to be watched over, regulated, and authoritatively determined.” For more information on reformed, or *Presbyterian*, church government, see Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1832.

During the early period of the Reformation, the Iconoclastic riots were becoming more and more prevalent throughout Europe.<sup>25</sup> Though Luther and Calvin, as well as various other well-known Reformers, were calling for a cleansing of the church and for its return to integrity, never did they condone the riots and massacre of innocent people. Calvin, again in his *Institutes*, goes so far as to show his appreciation for imagery in specific contexts as a reflection of God's glory, beauty, and creativity, while refuting the claims of Roman Catholic clergy regarding the necessity of images in worship:

Let Papists, then, if they have any sense of shame, henceforth desist from the futile plea, that images are the books of the unlearned – a plea so plainly refuted by innumerable passages of Scripture. And yet were I to admit the plea, it would not be a valid defence of their peculiar idols. It is well known what kind of monsters they obtrude upon us as divine. For what are the pictures or statues to which they append the names of saints, but exhibitions of the most shameless luxury or obscenity? Were any one to dress himself after their model, he would deserve the pillory. Indeed, brothels exhibit their inmates more chastely and modestly dressed than churches do images intended to represent virgins. The dress of the martyrs is in no respect more becoming. Let Papists then have some little regard to decency in decking their idols, if they would give the least plausibility to the false allegation, that they are books of some kind of sanctity.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For an in depth look at the iconoclastic movement in Europe during the Reformation see Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, vol. I, chap. XI, para. 12, 128. In addition to what is stated above, for a more extensive look at a Protestant understanding of images see Carlos M. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.



Figure 1. View southwest to the nave from the north aisle (c.1390). Oude Kerk, Amsterdam.



Figure 2. Painted wooden ceiling (late 15th and early 16th centuries) of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam.

Some followers of these Reformers interpreted this theology through the filter of years of persecution under corrupt clergymen and, instead of a peaceful transition, took the opportunity to retaliate, targeting the churches of those who formerly ruled. The result of these events was the loss of numerous works of art housed in churches across Europe, though the desired point was effectively made.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 207-214.

## CHAPTER 2: THE ARTISTIC ECONOMY OF THE NETHERLANDS AND THE STORY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK OF ESTHER

In the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the conclusion of the Eighty Years War against Spain (1568-1648), the Netherlands emerged as a leading world power economically, socially, and artistically. Dutch society was the most highly urbanized society in Europe at the time, boasting the highest literacy rates and a gross national income of 200 million guilders, and a remarkably large portion of the population owned works of art. Socially and religiously, the Netherlands tolerated the differing views held by Protestants and Catholics, along with those of various other religions, including Judaism.

The province of Holland was the point of departure for the spread of change in art, culture, and trade throughout the Netherlands. This period of affluence and growth is commonly known as the Dutch “Golden Age.” The art made in this region, especially paintings from the seventeenth century, shows most clearly the scope of transformation occurring in all of the Netherlands. The combination of artistic and social reform, along with the blossoming economy, served to make this era unique in the history of the Netherlands and all of Europe.<sup>28</sup>

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his influential work *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, comments on the effects of Protestantism in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, saying:

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<sup>28</sup> Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997, Introduction.

...the Dutch had converted to Protestantism and had overcome the despotism of Church and Crown. The Dutch political landscape was not defined by an aristocracy which had expelled its prince and tyrant or imposed laws on him...Most of the people were urban townspeople, well-off burghers who were involved in trading and who were not particularly pretentious, despite their comfortable lifestyle. However, when it was a question of fighting to preserve their well-earned rights, or the special privileges due to their provinces, cities, and corporations, they were prepared to revolt, bolstered by their firm faith in God and in their own courage and intelligence; ...These sensitive and artistically endowed people wanted to use their painting to delight in this satisfying, and comfortable existence which was as powerful as it was just. In their pictures they wanted to relish once more, in every possible situation, in the neatness of their cities, houses, furnishings and domestic peace, as well as their wealth, the respectable dress of their wives and children, the brilliance of their civil and political festivals...The Dutch painters also brought a sense of honest and cheerful existence to objects in nature. All their paintings are executed meticulously and combine a supreme freedom of artistic composition with a fine feeling for incidentals. Their subjects are treated both freely and faithfully, and they obviously loved the ephemeral. Their view was fresh and they concentrated intensely on the tiniest and most limited of things.<sup>29</sup>

Hegel was the forerunner of those who viewed Dutch painting through the lenses of both artistic and social conditions. He used the term “Realism” to define seventeenth-century Dutch painting, and noted the differences wrought by the pervasiveness of the Calvinist religion of the middle class, which strongly contrasted with that of the Catholic aristocracy in Flanders and other neighboring regions. The subjects that dominated the rest of Europe at this time, themes from Greek and Roman antiquity, New Testament narratives, and mythology were of lesser importance in Dutch painting. Though there are numerous examples of paintings

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<sup>29</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics; Lectures on Fine Arts*, By G. W. F. Hegel, Translated by T. M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. Quoted from Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Golden Age* (1997). He used an earlier edition of the book: G.W.F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, ed. F. Bassenge, Berlin, 1955, 803-804.

depicting pagan legend during this time period, such as Rembrandt's *Rape of Proserpina* (Figure 3) and Vermeer's *Diana and her Companions* (Figure 4), generally speaking, these subjects were retired in favor of realistic landscape paintings, genre, portraiture, and scenes from the Old Testament.<sup>30</sup> Even within the pagan narrative of the aforementioned work by Vermeer, there seem to be subtle Biblical references in the washing of the feet and the dove-shaped piece of cloth in the foreground.

After the Spaniards were driven from the northern Netherlands at the end of the war (1648), most churches were renovated for the purpose of Calvinistic worship. Owing to Protestant regulations of imagery, the Church was not able to patronize the arts in Holland as it once had.<sup>31</sup> Prior to this, most painters received the majority of their commissions from the religious sector. With this shift in patronage, the number of artists who painted religious scenes decreased immensely.

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<sup>30</sup> For more information on this subject see Albert Blankert, *Gods, Saints, & Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt ; [Exhibition Held at the] National Gallery of Art, Washington; Detroit Institute of Arts; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1980.*

<sup>31</sup> For the complex nature of the relationship between the Church and art during this period, see Xander van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor: Paintings for the Catholic Church in the Dutch Republic*, Zwolle: Waanders, 2008.





Figure 3. Rembrandt, *Rape of Proserpina*, 1631, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.



Figure 4. Vermeer, *Diana and Her Companions*, 1653-54, Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague.

The most notable exceptions to this trend were the painters of the so-called Utrecht School, who remained largely influenced by Roman Catholicism, or at the very least continued to produce religious paintings.<sup>32</sup> With the encouragement of Calvinists, the Synod of Dordrecht requested that the States-General finance a new Dutch translation of the Bible taken from the original Greek and Hebrew writings. This literary effort was one of the finest in Dutch history. The “States Bible” was published in 1637, nearly two decades after the idea was introduced. In the meantime, in accordance with Calvinist urgings to read the Scriptures and other Christian books, it was common for painters to portray their subjects holding or reading the Bible. This resulted in an interesting juxtaposition of the primacy of Scripture and the value of visual representation simultaneously. The other concern of the artists was the continuation of the tradition of precise realism and naturalism. There are many examples of paintings depicting reading and singing from spiritual books, reading letters, and writing, all of which show the Dutch appreciation for literacy and the Bible (Figures 5-7).<sup>33</sup>

The penchant for Biblical narrative paintings quickly moved from church to home in the Dutch Golden Age. Post 1578, the Dutch Protestants developed a holistic

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<sup>32</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), Art Gallery of Toronto, and Toledo Museum of Art, *Dutch Painting, the Golden Age*, 1945, Introduction, XIV. For painting in Utrecht, see especially Joneath A. Spicer with Lynn Federle Orr, *Masters of Light: Dutch Painters in Utrecht during the Golden Age*, exh. cat. (The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, and Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco), New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718*, New York: Harry Abrams, 1996, 50-53.

worldview derived from the Scriptures and the writing of Calvin that influenced even their taste in art and literature. Michael Haykin said it well when he stated that “Calvinism resonates deeply with biblical truth; it speaks to every area of human life and thought.”<sup>34</sup> Because of this circumstance, the demand for landscape, genre, and Biblical scenes blossomed in the Dutch middle class during the seventeenth century, as did the printing of religious pamphlets and books.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 5. Gerrit Dou, *The Bible Lesson, or Anne and Tobias*, 1645, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

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<sup>34</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism*, Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008, Foreword.

<sup>35</sup> Blankert, *Gods, Saints, & Heroes*, 22. Blankert comments on the overwhelming concern for religious themes in all of Dutch culture during this time, specifically noting the literature of the day: “If we take what was printed and continually reprinted as an indicator, then it appears that religious reading matter was in constant demand. In Hoorn, an average Dutch town, 54 percent of all books printed before 1700 were Bibles or other religious writings...In the oeuvre of the greatest and most widely read Dutch poets, Vondel and Cats, there is hardly a page without quotes from or allusions to biblical and antique stories.”



Figure 6. Pieter de Hooch, *Woman Reading a Letter*, 1664, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Figure 7. Nicolaes Maes, *Old Woman Dozing over a Book*, c. 1655, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Interestingly, it was the Dutch burgher that was the most common customer of the artist during the Golden Age. Though the notion that these patrons had an affinity only for realistic depictions of the world around them may have been exaggerated, it is certainly true that there was a vast market for genre paintings, still lifes, and naturalistic landscapes. Nevertheless, the burghers in Holland in the seventeenth century were also patrons of varied and skillful religious and history paintings.<sup>36</sup>

An important component of painting during the 1600s in Holland was the expression and communication of emotion in the work. Emphasis was placed on the precise moment in which a situation was irrevocably reversed, the beginning of a new reality. Examples of work by Rembrandt, such as the various versions of the *Angel Appearing to Hagar* (Figure 8), illustrate the instant that the anguish of transforms into praise and thanksgiving. Other examples of religious painting depicting Old

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<sup>36</sup> Blankert, *Gods, Saints, & Heroes*, 22.

Testament tales using this technique include Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast* (Figure 9) and Jan Steen's *Esther, Haman, and Ahasuerus* (Figure 10). The term *staetveranderinge*, derived from Greek word *peripeteia*, was used by the Dutch to denote the tradition of depicting a total reversal of circumstance in a single moment.<sup>37</sup>

The story of Esther, savior of the Jews, is one of the most beloved narratives in the Old Testament. The *staetveranderinge* technique was often used in depictions of her life, probably because there is no greater example of inexplicable and sudden change in circumstance than that of Esther, a Jew, becoming queen. In painting, however, Esther's life was reduced to a series of moments. These moments are visual reminders of how the story of Esther's triumph has inspired and encouraged for thousands of years. The Dutch Protestants were no exception. They were diligent students of Scripture, and the Old Testament book of Esther is both a picture of God's sovereign protection of His people against all earthly odds and a story of God using a young Jewish girl to fulfill His purposes. Dutch Christians in the Golden Age took great comfort in this tale of God's grace and protection.

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<sup>37</sup> The term *staetveranderinge* originated in the work of literary theorists like the Dutch poet Vondel, who made this idea the central theme of his late dramas. The word from which the writers coined the term, the Greek word *peripeteia*, signifies "complete reversal of situation and mood." Vondel cites the tale of Jephtha as an example of the idea, showing the striking contrast of his joy in victory one moment, with the despair of sacrificing his daughter the next. For more information on this subject, see Blankert *Gods, Saints, & Heroes*, 26.





Figure 8. Rembrandt, *The Angel Appearing to Hagar*, c. 1655, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg.



Figure 9. Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1635, The National Gallery, London.



Figure 10. Jan Steen, *Esther, Haman, and Ahasuerus*, c. 1668, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

The central purpose of the author of Esther (unknown) was to record the deliverance of the Jewish people during the reign of the Persian emperor Xerxes,<sup>38</sup> and to commemorate the establishment of the annual Jewish festival of Purim. The Book of Esther gives a detailed account of the events leading up to the festival, and the author concludes the book with a passage explaining its significance:<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Note that the name Xerxes is interchangeable with Ahasuerus.

<sup>39</sup> All biblical references and text here are found in Lockman Foundation, *New American Standard Bible*, La Habra, California: Foundation Press Publications, publisher for the Lockman Foundation, 1971. This version is considered the nearest to a literal translation into English by most biblical scholars.



Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, the Jews established and made a custom for themselves and for their descendants and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they would not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation and according to their appointed time annually. So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants. Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim. He sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, namely, words of peace and truth, to establish these days of Purim at their appointed times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and just as they had established for themselves and for their descendants with instructions for their times of fasting and their lamentations. The command of Esther established these customs for Purim, and it was written in the book.<sup>40</sup>

The book begins with a banquet, and throughout the book many important plot developments occur against the backdrop of lavish feasts or banquets, such as the one in the first chapter. King Xerxes has called for all of his noblemen, princes, and army officers to attend a great celebration that will last a number of days.<sup>41</sup> At the height of the banquet, he calls for his queen, Vashti, to come down to be admired by his court for her beauty. The queen, who also gave a banquet for the women of the court, refuses to obey. Fearing the example of Vashti's disobedience would give the women of the land (Persia and Media) an excuse to rebel, the king speaks to his advisors, who encourage him to depose her. Xerxes agrees to their proposal, issues an edict across

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<sup>40</sup> Esther 9:26-32.

<sup>41</sup> Esther 1:4: "And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days."

the land calling for all women to honor their husbands, and removes Vashti from her reign as queen.<sup>42</sup>

The result of this new decree is a call for all the fair virgins in the land to be brought before the king, and from these maidens the king would choose his new queen. Esther enters the scene as a beautiful young Jewish maiden, the niece of Mordecai:

Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai....He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face, and when her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to the citadel of Susa into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women. Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him. So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem. Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known.<sup>43</sup>

Esther undergoes all of the preparations that were customary for the maidens who were to go before the king. When it was Esther's turn, she did only what Hegai,

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<sup>42</sup> Esther 1:19-22: "If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small. This word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people."

<sup>43</sup> Esther 2:5-10.

the king's advisor to the women, suggested. The text states that Esther found favor with all who saw her, that Ahasuerus loved her more than all of the other maidens, and that he made her queen in place of Vashti. Instead of the story ending happily at this point, however, the plot thickens. Mordecai, Esther's uncle, has faithfully visited his niece through all the months of her preparation. No one is aware that Esther is of Jewish descent. Mordecai, during one of his visits to the palace to see his niece, discovers a plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai tells Esther, who informs the king of the plot, including the fact that it was Mordecai who brought it to light. Mordecai, through Esther, saves the king.

Yet another story line is taking place simultaneously in the book. Enter Haman the Agagite, the man whom King Ahasuerus had placed as leader in the land above all the princes. Every day, all of the gatekeepers and servants bowed and paid homage to Haman as he passed through the gates, all except Mordecai. Furious that Mordecai refuses to bow to him, Haman seeks to bring him to ruin, along with all of the Jewish people in the land. Haman bides his time, and months later, after devising a scheme to destroy the Jews, he approaches the king, saying:

There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of all other people and they do not observe the king's laws, so it is not in the king's interest to let them remain. If it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that they will be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who carry on the king's business, to put into the king's treasuries. Then the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, "The silver is yours, and the people also, to do with them as you please."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Esther 3:8-11.

The scribes write the decree, and it is sent to every corner of the land. There is great weeping and wailing and despair among the Jews. Mordecai pleads with Esther to take the case before the king, to save herself and her people. Esther asks that all her people in the city fast and pray for three days and three nights as she prepares to go in to see the king. There were a number of factors that affected this plan. First of all, the queen was not to approach the king without being called, but Esther found favor in the king's sight when she appeared. Secondly, the king was still unaware that Haman's decree would also affect his queen. When Esther attends the banquet of the king, she requests that a feast be prepared and that Haman should be a guest of honor. The king grants her request. Meanwhile, Haman is still seething with anger that Mordecai will not pay homage to him. Haman's wife encourages him to build a gallows, hang Mordecai, then attend the feast of the king.

The king spends a sleepless night after realizing that nothing has been done to repay Mordecai for saving his life. He calls for Haman to describe what should be done for a man who merits the highest honor in the land. Haman, thinking the king is referring to himself, conceives an elaborate plan for the man to be heralded throughout the city, to which the king replies, "do so for Mordecai the Jew."<sup>45</sup> Haman despairs and relates the events to his advisors and his wife, who foresee that Haman will fall before his enemy, Mordecai. When Haman attends the feast that Esther has prepared for the king, he is brought to justice. Queen Esther asks the king to spare her

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<sup>45</sup> Esther 6:10.

life and that of her people, and illuminates the plot devised by Haman. The king is infuriated and decrees that Haman be hanged on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai, along with all of his family. Esther then falls on her face before the king and requests that the decree made by Haman be revoked. Ahasuerus complies, and there is great feasting and rejoicing among the Jews for many days. Mordecai himself takes the new decree himself throughout the land, the Jews defeat their enemies, and the feast of Purim is established.

What was the significance of the story of Esther for Dutch Protestants? Several parallels can be drawn from this Old Testament saga that appealed to the sensibilities of Dutch Christians in the seventeenth century. Now that Israel has been released from captivity, Haman's edict is the final major effort in the Old Testament period to destroy the Jews. With Haman's defeat, they enjoy rest from their enemies, not unlike the Dutch Protestants who recently won religious freedom after rebelling from the rule of the Roman Catholic Church. The Book of Esther also draws upon a "remnant motif" that recurs throughout the Bible depicting God preserving his people through natural disasters, disease, warfare, or other catastrophes that threaten them.<sup>46</sup> The future existence of God's chosen people, and ultimately the appearance of the Redeemer-Messiah, was jeopardized by Haman's plot to destroy the Jews. The preservation and protection of the children of Israel by their God is a theme prevalent

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<sup>46</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, John H. Stek, Walter W. Wessel, and Ronald F. Youngblood, *NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2002, Introductions to the Books of the Bible, Esther.

throughout the entirety of the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> The Dutch Protestants considered themselves a continuation of this principle and held firm to the belief that God was preserving a remnant through them in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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<sup>47</sup> For more on this subject see Yvonne Bleyerveld, "Chaste, Obedient and Devout: Biblical Women As Patterns of Female Virtue in Netherlandish and German Graphic Art, Ca. 1500-1750," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*. 28, 2000, no. 4: 219-250.

### CHAPTER 3: THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH ART

Many scholars have reflected on the appeal that the story of Esther held for seventeenth-century Dutch Christian artists and collectors. What is significant in the tale that made it especially poignant for Dutch Christian viewers? As previously mentioned, Dutch Reformed (and/or Calvinist) collectors were extremely interested in Old Testament art. Calvin himself was an advocate of the thorough study of biblical narrative, both of the Old and New Testament. Though Protestants throughout Europe in the seventeenth century would have been of one mind about the usefulness of careful study of biblical stories, the popularity of the Book of Esther in particular was largely limited to the Dutch Republic. There were several factors that contributed to this reality.

First of all, the Netherlands had a free open market, resulting in many Dutch Christians and Jews having both the financial wherewithal and taste to buy art for their homes. Naturally, they would want depictions of the beloved Old Testament tales available for contemplation. This was not the first era in which artists painted Old Testament stories, but it was the first post-Reformation era that allowed artists to paint outside of a Christological view. Pre-Reformation Old Testament paintings were valued mainly as prefigurations of New Testament happenings. In earlier Catholic art, Queen Esther was rendered typologically as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary. Obviously, this would not have held much appeal for Dutch Protestants, who were drawn to the tale of Esther because of their identification with the Jews of the Old

Testament, not because of their deference to Mary.<sup>48</sup> In this same vein, the kings of Israel and the ancestors of Christ were often represented as prefigurations of the Christ, but also as the “father figures,” or *padres figurativos*, of Catholic monarchs during the Counter-Reformation. These so-called identification portraits came into prominence during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and practicing Roman Catholics continued the tradition well into the following century. Heroes, in the classical and biblical sense, served as models for contemporary princes, dukes, and noblemen.

For example, Friedrich B. Polleross, in his book on the role of this type of portraiture in painting, makes reference to the Habsburgs’ sixteenth-century festival decorations that used the Old Testament champions David, Solomon, Moses, Joshua, and others as models for Habsburg princes. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, Queen Maria Anna of Austria was represented by several renderings of biblical women, including Rachel, Esther, Deborah, and Judith, all of whom denoted certain aspects of the queen’s character: nobility, justice, religiosity, magnanimity, and power. This tradition served as propaganda for the Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century, with various identification portraits appearing in pamphlets, illustrated manuscripts, etchings, and paintings.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Alfred Bader, *The Bible Through Dutch Eyes: From Genesis Through the Apocrypha*: Exhibition catalogue, Milwaukee Art Center, 9 April-23 May 1976, Milwaukee: The Art Center, 1976, 132.

<sup>49</sup> Friedrich B. Polleross, *Between Typology and Psychology: The Role of the Identification Portrait in Updating Old Testament Representations*, University of Heidelberg, 1991, 80-84.



Protestant paintings of biblical scenes, like those found in the Book of Esther, focused on the truths found in the text itself, and how they could be applied to daily life in the 1600s. In seventeenth-century Holland, essentially for the first time, artists produced works of art illustrating Old Testament texts that Dutch Christians and Jews desired and valued largely for the sake of the narrative itself.

The second fact to note is the political temperature in the seventeenth century. In the first decade of the seventeenth century Spain entered into a twelve-year truce with the Netherlands. After the Thirty Years' War, the Dutch finally had peace. However, that freedom was short lived. The battle for Dutch independence continued until 1648, when, in the Peace of Westphalia, the independence of the Dutch Provinces was formally recognized. Dutch Protestants, well versed in Scripture, viewed themselves as the New Israel, God's covenant people. The leaders of the rebellion against Spain were associated with Old Testament heroes, victorious in battle by God's grace despite the odds, while their Spanish oppressors were likened to Old Testament tyrants and villains such as Haman, Pharaoh, and Nebuchadnezzar.

The experience of surviving the war against Spain brought to mind the miracle of God preserving a remnant of His people in the Book of Esther. Many depictions of Esther and the Purim story appeared shortly after the twelve years of freedom drew to a close, and the Dutch realized their freedom was again in jeopardy. As seen in many of the following images, the audience would recognize Haman as a representation of Spain, an idolatrous tyrant, while Esther and Mordecai were associated with the virtuous Dutch leaders used by God to save His people. Occasionally, artists would

portray the characters clothed in contemporary dress to further emphasize the parallels between this Old Testament story and the Dutch struggle for independence.<sup>50</sup> Notwithstanding the variety of artistic styles and the different episodes selected from the Old Testament narrative, the themes of Esther as the savior of her people, Haman as the tyrant, and Mordecai as the wise and loving advisor are constant. They are directly connected with Dutch national pride, the idea of Dutch Christians as the New Israel and remnant, and the belief in God's preservation of the Dutch Republic and His protection from evil invaders.

There are numerous examples of artists who put these views to practical use in their work. The first painter worthy of note is Pieter Lastman (1583-1633), who became a renowned artist in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. He was trained as a Mannerist and traveled to Italy, as did many of his contemporaries, but returned to Amsterdam in 1607 and remained there for the rest of his life. Often categorized as a "Pre-Rembrandist," Lastman can be credited with many of the stylistic innovations found in the work of both Lievens and Rembrandt, as he was their instructor in Amsterdam for some number of months. He is most famous for the personal style that he developed upon his return from Italy, and the influences of Raphael and Hans Rottenhammer, a German painter active in Rome and Venice, are evident in his work.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For a more thorough look at the relationships among Dutch Protestants, Rembrandt and fellow artists, Dutch Jews, and the appeal of Old Testament narrative, see Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Grove Art Online, *Oxford Art Online*, Oxford University Press, 2008, Pieter Lastman.

Lastman painted two scenes from the Book of Esther, *The Triumph of Mordecai* (Figure 11) in 1624, taken from Esther 6:11, and *Haman Begging Esther for Mercy* (Figure 12), c. 1618. In the first painting, Lastman presents Mordecai sitting on a horse, being led with fanfare through the streets by his enemy, Haman. The representation of Mordecai's seat of honor, and Haman's envy, is Lastman's interpretation of good triumphing over evil. He also includes the temple of Jerusalem in the background, perhaps to show the continuity of God's preservation of the Jewish people and their hope for redemption.<sup>52</sup> There are few literary sources supporting the majority of Lastman's work, but this painting is taken directly from the sixth chapter of the Book of Esther. The biblical scene is typical of Lastman in its depiction of conflict and resolution, its focus on a narrative, and its great attention to detail, character representation, and theatrical setting.<sup>53</sup> Rembrandt's famous etching of the same subject (Figure 13, ca. 1641) was modeled after this painting and has compositional similarities with his masterpiece, the *Nightwatch* (1642).<sup>54</sup>

The second painting of the Book of Esther by Lastman, *Haman Begging Esther for 12 Mercy* (Figure 12), depicts a dramatic scene unfolding at the table of Ahasuerus. Haman begs Esther for mercy on his knees as she turns her face away and shields herself with her hands. Ahasuerus leaps up from the table, arms outstretched,

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<sup>52</sup> The temple in the background is most likely a representation of the so-called Third Temple described in Ezekial 40. The Second Temple would have been destroyed prior to this event.

<sup>53</sup> Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt's Reading The Artist's Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003, 67-68.

<sup>54</sup> Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 97-99.



Figure 11. Pieter Lastman, *The Triumph of Mordecai*, 1624, Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



Figure 12. Pieter Lastman, *Haman Begging Esther for Mercy*, c. 1618, National Museum, Warsaw.

seemingly to remove Haman from Esther's presence. This rendering of the scene shows Esther as the savior of her people, feminine but strong, unyielding even in the presence of the king. This archetype of a savior would have been appealing for Dutch Protestants in the early seventeenth century. The story of Esther gave validity to the claim that God uses ordinary means to fulfill His purposes and protect His people. Steven Nadler, in his book *Rembrandt's Jews*, rightly calls Lastman's representation melodramatic, but also notes that it influenced Lastman's pupil Rembrandt.<sup>55</sup>

Rembrandt, the greatest painter of the Dutch Golden Age, was prolific in the production of biblical scenes and scenes from history. Typically, his art is thought of as prototypically Protestant, though recent scholarship suggests that he had close ties with many well-known Jewish teachers and merchants, including Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel.<sup>56</sup> In the 1640s, Rembrandt produced a limited number of etchings, and the only one taken from the Old Testament was that of the story of Esther, specifically *The Triumph of Mordecai* (Figure 13). As previously mentioned, the influence of Lastman is obvious in this work, as is that of the earlier Leiden artist Lucas van Leyden, whose engraving of 1515 shows notable similarities (Figure 14).<sup>57</sup> His largest etching of an Old Testament subject,<sup>58</sup> Rembrandt's *Triumph of Mordecai* shows Esther and the king on a balcony from which they are able to view the simultaneous victory of Mordecai and the downfall of Haman.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Steven M. Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 100-102.

<sup>56</sup> Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 2002, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Anat Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work*. Delft: Eburon, 2003, 40.

<sup>58</sup> Gilboa, *Images*, 40.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.





Figure 13. Rembrandt, *The Triumph of Mordecai*, etching, c. 1641, Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam.



Figure 14. Lucas van Leyden, *The Triumph of Mordecai*, engraving, 1515, Art Institute of Chicago.

Some scholars have noted that the archway in Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, a contemporary work, is reminiscent of the arch in the etching. A parallel between Mordecai, deliverer of the Jews, and the Amsterdam militia, deliverers of the Dutch from the hands of the Spanish, is easy to infer. It would seem, then, that in the *Nightwatch* Rembrandt depicted Captain Cocq and his men as seventeenth-century counterparts to Mordecai.<sup>60</sup>

Rembrandt's biblical scenes are dominated by representations of women including Susanna, Judith, Tamar, and Esther, to name a few. He was more interested in the heroines of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha than those of the New Testament, especially in the 1640s.<sup>61</sup> According to Gary Schwartz, Rembrandt was inspired by the play *Hester*, by Johannes Serwouters (1623-1677), when he painted *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther* ( Figure 15).<sup>62</sup> Two years after its completion, Jan Vos wrote a book of poetry (1662) describing the painting in a verse:

*Here one sees Haman eating with Ahasuerus and Esther.  
But it is in vain; his breast is full of regret and pain.  
He eats Esther's food; but deeper into her heart.  
The king is mad with revenge and rage.  
The wrath of a monarch...*<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> David Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, 189.

<sup>61</sup> Gilboa, *Images*, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt's Universe: His Art, His Life, His World*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2006, 112.

<sup>63</sup> Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics, 1630-1730*, The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1953, 52.



Figure 15. Rembrandt, *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther*, 1660, Pushkin Museum, Moscow.



Figure 16. Rembrandt, *Heroine from the Old Testament*, c.1632-33, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada.



In both *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther* and an earlier work that probably depicts Esther preparing to see the King (Figure 16),<sup>64</sup> Rembrandt shows Esther as a brave queen, not a meek Jewish maiden.<sup>65</sup> The queen as savior and deliverer of her people was a subject to which seventeenth-century Dutch Protestants felt a kinship, although the nature of Esther's assumed piety and evident obedience were also integral to their love of the tale.

Rembrandt is by far the best-known artist mentioned here, but he was not alone in his interest in Old Testament heroines, as many other Dutch painters and printmakers of the period, especially those from his circle, produced works depicting the life and deeds of Queen Esther. One such artist was a fellow pupil of Lastman, Jan Lievens (1606-1674). Lievens' early works are close to Rembrandt's in style, and his well-known version of *The Feast of Esther* (Figure 17) was formerly attributed to his more famous contemporary.<sup>66</sup> Filled with youthful exuberance and stark contrasts of light and dark, the painting depicts life-sized figures of Esther, Ahasuerus, Haman, and a servant at the feast that Esther prepared for the king. It is another example of a *staetveranderinge*: as Esther tells the king of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, Haman recoils in shock and dismay, and Ahasuerus responds by violently thrusting out his arms. Lievens presents Haman enshrouded in shadow—as a so-called *repoussoir* figure—perhaps to show his spiritual darkness and to contrast him with the righteous, brightly lit figure of Esther seated opposite him at the table.

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<sup>64</sup> Though most scholars agree that this is a depiction of Esther preparing to see the king, there are claims that this image could portray Bathsheba.

<sup>65</sup> Gilboa, *Images*, 41.

<sup>66</sup> Grove Art Online, *Oxford Art Online*, Oxford University Press, 2008, Jan Lievens.

Some of these characteristics are also seen in a version of the same subject by the Amsterdam painter Jan Victors (1619-79), a follower of Rembrandt whose works of the middle decades of the century are markedly Rembrandtesque in style (Figure 18). Victors typically chose scenes from the Old Testament that bear testimony to the constancy of the God of Israel, and his painting of *Esther and Haman before Ahasuerus* (c. 1638-1640) is no exception.<sup>67</sup> As seen in paintings previously discussed in this study, the subject was the most popular of the various events in the Book of Esther, allowing artists to focus on the *staetverandinge* motif and to display their ability to show a range of dramatic gestures and vivid facial expressions of the sort that are commonly regarded as being typical of Baroque art. Seventeenth-century Dutch viewers would clearly have enjoyed these aspects of Victors' painting, but they would also have implicitly understood the underlying message of God's unwavering support for his chosen people.

Episodes from the Book of Esther were especially popular in the circle of Rembrandt. There is no need to discuss or illustrate more than a few, but no artist was more fascinated with the tale than Arent (Aert) de Gelder (1665-1727), who drew upon it in at least a dozen surviving paintings. As Steven Nadler recently put it, "de Gelder produced so many works from the story that, had he been an anonymous painter working in the Middle Ages, he surely would be known to us now as The Master of the Book of Esther."<sup>68</sup> Rembrandt's "last pupil,"<sup>69</sup> de Gelder entered the master's workshop around 1661 and not unexpectedly developed a style, characterized by broad brushstrokes and thick impasto, dependent on Rembrandt's latest works. But his obsession with subjects

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<sup>67</sup> Getty Center (Los Angeles, Calif.) and J. Paul Getty Trust, *The Getty*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1990, Jan Victors.

<sup>68</sup> Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, 102.

<sup>69</sup> J.W. von Moltke, *Grove Art Online*, Oxford University Press, 2008.



Figure 17. Jan Lievens, *The Feast of Esther*, c.1625, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.



Figure 18. Jan Victors, *Esther and Haman before Ahasuerus*, 1638-1640, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum.

from the Book of Esther is hard to account for. A leading specialist, J. W. von Moltke, has speculated that the “story of Esther’s life interested de Gelder more than any other biblical event, possibly because of the human dimension,”<sup>70</sup> an explanation that fails to satisfy and, moreover, fails to acknowledge the significance of the story for contemporary Dutch society.

Unlike most Dutch artists of the period, de Gelder did not focus exclusively on the banquet scene. Instead, he chose some of the more unusual aspects of the tale. In *Esther and Mordecai Writing Their Letter to the Jews* (1675; Figure 19), for example, he focused on a quiet exchange between the two protagonists that would have resonated with viewers in the Protestant Dutch Republic, for the culture prized literacy as a necessary skill for reading Scripture and bought countless pictures of people reading or writing letters.<sup>71</sup> A related painting by de Gelder (Figure 20), of 1685, shows Esther and Mordecai discussing what appears to be the contents of an open book on the table before them. Still another quiet moment is depicted in several paintings by de Gelder of *Esther Bedecked* (Figure 21), but here the emphasis is on a completely different aspect of Dutch society: its fascination with exotic costumes—also a constant in Rembrandt’s oeuvre—and, more generally, with costly attire. The Protestant work ethic resulted in accumulations of great wealth in the Dutch Republic and fostered the widespread consumption of luxury goods. At the same time, however, it resulted in a sort of national anxiety. The Dutch were concerned that too much conspicuous consumption smacked of

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<sup>70</sup> Moltke, *Grove Art Online*, 2008.

<sup>71</sup> I am grateful to Professor Zucker for these and many of the other observations in the paragraphs on Arent de Gelder. Professor Zucker also reminds me that the best-known examples of Dutch “letter pictures” are those by Vermeer, which date to the 1650s and 1660s.

the cardinal sin of vanity, often symbolized in Dutch paintings by a woman admiring herself in a mirror. Presumably the somewhat sheepish expression of Esther in de Gelder's painting, as well as the mirror inconspicuously displayed on the table at the right, would not have been overlooked by contemporary viewers.

One last painting by de Gelder will serve to highlight the originality and variety of his approach to the story of Esther. In *The Banquet of Ahasuerus* (Figure 22), he depicts not the usual feast of Ahasuerus, Esther, and Haman, but an earlier episode in the saga, when, after a week of feasting and drinking, Ahasuerus drunkenly asks one of his eunuchs to summon Queen Vashti, whose refusal to appear prompts him to dismiss her and choose Esther as his wife.<sup>72</sup> Again de Gelder indulges his love of exotic trappings, while also highlighting the drunken behavior of the bleary-eyed, overweight Ahasuerus, who spills his drink in his lap, while other figures in the painting look downright foolish. Such scenes of comic revelry were also highly popular in Netherlandish art, for, notwithstanding the dictates of Calvinist propriety, the Dutch were inveterate indulgers (or over-indulgers) in food and drink, a modest sin that could be poked fun at relatively harmlessly in pictures such as this one by de Gelder.

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<sup>72</sup> The J. Paul Getty Museum,  
<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=800>.



Figure 19. Arent de Gelder, *Esther and Mordecai Writing Their Letter to the Jews*, 1675, National Museum of Fine Arts, Buenos Aires.



Figure 20. Arent de Gelder, *Esther and Mordecai*, 1685, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.





Figure 21. Arent [Aert] de Gelder, *Esther Bedecked*, 1684, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 22. Arent [Aert] de Gelder, *The Banquet of Ahasuerus*, 1680's, Getty Center.

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A seventeenth-century Dutch viewer would have gleaned truths from Scripture by looking at the various paintings and prints considered above, as well as many others. It would be evident that Esther was wholly reliant on the sovereignty of her God, and dependent on his mercy and favor. She was brave in the face of danger, meek and obedient as a young maiden, and ultimately was the savior of her people. She was respectful of her elders and had a loving relationship with her uncle, Mordecai. Her willingness to do her duty, her calm and pleasant demeanor, and her chaste appearance, even when over-dressed, all were typical of Dutch Protestant ideology.<sup>73</sup>

The Old Testament narrative of the Book of Esther became a lynchpin of Dutch Protestant art in the seventeenth century. Not only was it a story linked to national pride, it also encouraged the viewer towards piety and godliness. There were numerous artists who chose to depict the story of Esther during this time, all of whom understood the poignancy of the subject for their viewers. Looking at a picture illustrating a passage from the Book of Esther would constantly remind Dutch viewers of the mercy of their God, the courage of their countrymen, and the joy of defeating their enemies in battle.

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<sup>73</sup> Dana Pulver, *Esther the Queen beneath the Mask*, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, JDC Europe: 2009.



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