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In this portrait of a couple's loving intimacy, Rembrandt alludes to the chastity of Rebekah during Isaac and Rebekah's sojourn among the Philistines.

A Couple's Intimacy

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In this portrait of a couple's loving intimacy, commonly known as "The Jewish Bride," Dutch Baroque master Rembrandt van Rijn alludes to the chastity of Rebekah during Isaac and Rebekah's sojourn among the Philistines. Jonathan Bikker, in his notes for the exhibition *Rembrandt: The Late Works* at the National Gallery, London, in 2014, suggests that the quality of intimacy provides the key to unraveling the painting's iconography.¹

According to Genesis 26:1-11, God protected Isaac and Rebekah from a famine by sending them to the Philistine territory of Gerar ruled by King Abimelech. Isaac was afraid of being murdered by men who might desire his beautiful wife Rebekah and, to protect himself, he pretended to be her brother. This ruse worked until Abimelech, looking out a window, observed Isaac fondling his wife. When the king confronted him, Isaac confessed to his scheme. Then Abimelech, in his wisdom, reprimanded Isaac: he explained that Isaac's plan made it more likely that Rebekah's honor would be ruined (and, when her chastity was violated, that guilt would be brought upon them all) than if Isaac had been honest and protected her as her husband.

Rembrandt omits from the final painting the figure of Abimelech and his rebuke of Isaac's self-serving plan, although his drawings of the same subject include the leader. Instead, he redirects attention to the sincerity between the couple.

Later artists revered the tenderness conveyed in Rembrandt's portrayal of the couple's exchange of loving glances. For instance, Vincent van Gogh, when he first viewed the painting in 1885, commented that he would give up ten years of his life to be able to sit in front of it for a fortnight with a crust of bread. He continued in a letter to his brother Theo, "What an intimate, what an infinitely sympathetic painting."² The couple's physical and emotional intimacy is depicted by hand gestures: the man places his right hand lovingly on her bosom while she caresses it with her left hand. Many of Rembrandt's later works are characterized by the sort of intimacy that van Gogh and all of Rembrandt's audience through the centuries have recognized and appreciated in this image.

NOTES

1 Jonathan Bikker and Gregor J. M. Weber, *Rembrandt: The Late Works* (London, UK: National Gallery Company Limited, 2014), 193.

2 *Ibid.*