

Rembrandt's Etching B. 126: An Unrecognized Scene from the Book of Esther

by Roelof van Straten

It is quite astonishing that, even after more than 370 years, no art historian – as far as I could trace – ever recognized the true subject of Rembrandt's etching B. 126. The print, signed and dated 1648, is usually called 'Jews in the Synagogue', or, alternatively, 'Pharisees in the Temple.'¹

The scene represented in B. 126 shows, to the left, two standing elderly men talking with each other. From their postures and gestures, and with their faces opposite and near each other, it is obvious that their conversation is not meant to be heard by others. In the centre of the print we see a man sitting on a low wall, his back halfways turned towards the two men. The right part of the scene shows people in Eastern clothing (long mantles, some wearing a turban) leaving, others entering, a huge interior, apparently through a high gateway.

The scene described here is entirely based on the Book of Esther 2:21-22, where we read:

And in those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, ...²

Thus, what we see here is Mordecai, sitting at the gate of the king's palace, overhearing the conversation of the two eunuchs, who are conspiring against the king. Mordecai then informs Queen Esther about the conspiracy; she immediately informs King Ahasuerus. After an investigation the king has the two eunuchs hanged.

How can it be that the correct subject of the print has not been recognized so far? Probably, art historians all too lightly took it for granted that the Eastern-looking people would be Jews, or, more specifically, Pharisees. The clothing cannot be seen as anything more specific than 'Eastern', however. And as the event takes place in Persia, Eastern clothing is appropriate, of course. Also the architecture, always identified as a temple or a synagogue, cannot be identified more specific than as a 'huge building' [or interior]; there is not a single detail in Rembrandt's print that would indicate that a temple or synagogue is meant here. The entrance and interior of a palace is even more likely than a religious building.

It took some years, but now we finally know the true subject of B. 126!³

¹ The print is signed and dated 'Rembrandt f. 1648'.

² The event is also described in the apocryphal Additions to Esther, 12:1-2.

³ I recognized the subject of the print in c. 1992, when I was preparing an iconographic index on Rembrandt's etchings. This index was only published in 2018: R. van Straten, *ICONCLASS Indexes: Dutch Prints, vol. 6: Rembrandt and his School*, Leiden 2018 [see note B. 126 on p. 308].