



Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well

Ferdinand Bol
(Dordrecht 1616 – 1680 Amsterdam)

ca. 1645–46

oil on canvas

171 x 171.8 cm

FB-106

Currently on view at The Louvre

How To Cite

Lara Yeager-Crasselt, "Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well", (FB-106), in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., Ed., New York, 2017

<http://www.theleidencollection.com/archive/>

This page is available on the site's Archive. PDF of every version of this page is available on the Archive, and the Archive is managed by a permanent URL. Archival copies will never be deleted. New versions are added only when a substantive change to the narrative occurs.

Ferdinand Bol's tender portrayal of the Old Testament story of Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well demonstrates the artist's sensitivity and invention in rendering biblical narratives.^[1] As told in the Book of Moses, the aging patriarch Abraham sent his servant Eliezer to Mesopotamia in search of a wife for his son, Isaac. Upon reaching the edge of the city of Nahor, Eliezer stopped by a well and prayed to God for guidance. He asked that the first woman to show him and his camels kindness by offering them water would become Isaac's chosen wife. "And so it came to pass, before he had done speaking, that, behold, Rebecca came out . . . with her pitcher upon her shoulder. And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher and came up. And the servant ran to meet her, and said, 'Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher.' 'Drink, my lord': and she hastened, and let down her pitcher upon her hand, and gave him a drink" (Gen. 24:10–20).

Seated with his back to the viewer, Eliezer cups Rebecca's large pitcher between his hands to take his first sip of water. Broad passages of light and dark define his thick shoulders and torso, which are clothed in a brown tunic and accented by a bright red-belted sash.^[2] Rebecca supports the heavy vessel from below, and gently tilts the pitcher towards Eliezer's lips. She forms the core of the painting's pyramidal composition, holding a position of strength and stability. As Rebecca gazes down on Eliezer with a soft, compassionate expression, she seems to have already accepted God's will. Light falling over her face and cream-colored robes accents her earring, as well as a jewel nestled into the cascade of maroon fabric behind Eliezer, jewelry that Rebecca would receive as a gift for her hand in marriage.^[3]

Next to Rebecca is a young maidservant whose crimson dress echoes the color of Eliezer's belted sash. She empties a bucket of water into a trough for sheep, three of which are partially visible in this tightly cropped composition.^[4] Behind the figures is a rugged, mountainous landscape with a view of Nahor's rooftops visible in the left background. Near the city are Eliezer's retinue and camels, one of which peers out toward its master, eager to receive its own drink.

By focusing on the interaction between Rebecca and Eliezer, Bol captured the humanity and grace that accompanied this divine moment. In doing so, he evoked not only Rebecca's own attributes, but also the universal



Fig 1. After Rembrandt, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, ca. 1638, pen and wash, 17.3 x 21.6 cm, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, inv. no. AE-660



Fig 2. Ferdinand Bol, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, second half of the 1640s, pen and brown ink, brown wash, 18 x 29.2 cm, Albertina, Vienna, inv. no. 8768



Fig 3. Ferdinand Bol, *Couple in a Landscape*, ca. 1648, oil on canvas, 100 x 92 cm, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht



qualities of generosity and humility that made her a model for wives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.^[5] The story of Rebecca and Eliezer was celebrated in prints, emblem books, and *penningen*, marriage tokens given to brides on their wedding day.^[6] The two figures were traditionally depicted in a large stage-like setting before the well, where a group of onlookers watches Rebecca's formal and reserved passing of the pitcher to Eliezer. Bol's approach, which emphasized the delicate human relationship between Rebecca and Eliezer, reflected the influence of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), whose studio Bol left around 1641.^[7]

Although Rembrandt himself never painted this Old Testament story, several drawings both by and attributed to the artist from the late 1630s and early 1640s demonstrate that the subject interested him and members of his workshop.^[8] A drawing attributed to Rembrandt at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, dated to the 1640s, depicts Rebecca gently guiding the pitcher to Eliezer's lips, much as in this painting.^[9] A slightly later pen and wash drawing in Darmstadt (**fig 1**), a copy of a lost Rembrandt painting, is a particularly close compositional prototype for Bol's painting. The image shows Eliezer seated with his back to the viewer, rendered in half shadow. Rebecca tenderly clasps her hand to her chest as she and her maidservant gaze down toward him. In his painting, Bol simplified the narrative by monumentalizing the figures and focusing on Rebecca's act of kindness.^[10]

Bol's treatment of this story corresponded to other biblical history paintings he executed in the mid-1640s, such as the Leiden Collection's *The Angel Appearing to Elijah*, dated to ca. 1642, and *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and *Judah Gives Tamar His Signet Ring*, both dated to 1644.^[11] In each of these works Bol similarly situated large, weighty figures in tightly composed landscapes. With his rich chiaroscuro and tonal palette, Bol focused on quiet narrative moments that emphasized intimate human interaction. Among these works, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* displays a more assured command of form, space and the exchange of gestures, suggesting that he executed it at a slightly later date, probably around 1645–46.^[12]

Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well is Bol's only known painting of this subject, but he also rendered this biblical narrative in a drawing from the latter half of the 1640s (**fig 2**).^[13] In this work, Bol expanded the scope of the composition by adding more figures and enlarging the setting. Most significantly, he distanced the relationship between Rebecca and Eliezer.



Rebecca, now wearing a large broad-brimmed hat, stands above Abraham's servant as he looks past her and balances the pitcher on his knee. To the left, an arched doorway reveals a gentle landscape, while Eliezer's camels gather at the well to the right. The substantial differences that exist between the drawing and the painting suggest that the two works were created independently of each other.

In about 1648, Bol executed a *portrait historié* of Anna van Erckel and her first husband, Erasmus Scharlaken, as Isaac and Rebecca (**fig 3**).^[14] The wealthy couple's decision to have themselves portrayed in the guise of Old Testament figures was in line with seventeenth-century fashions, but it also demonstrates the importance of this biblical episode as a model for married couples.^[15] The woman's costume in the Dordrecht work is nearly identical to the cream-colored dress worn by Rebecca in the Leiden Collection painting, and both works share an earth-toned palette and undulating use of light and shadow. These similarities, while establishing an iconographic relationship between the two images, also reinforce the dating of *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* to this same period of Bol's career. These two paintings indicate that Bol continued to explore the pictorial possibilities of the subject during the latter part of the 1640s, much as did other artists who had studied with Rembrandt earlier in that decade, including Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (1621–74) and Carel Fabritius (1622–54).^[6]

-Lara Yeager-Crasselt

Endnotes

1. The painting had been in the same French private collection since the beginning of nineteenth century. According to the auction house, it was previously attributed to Rembrandt. Albert Blankert confirmed the attribution to Bol in 2009. For Bol's religious history paintings, see Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 27–40, 89–97, nos. 1–17. For the story of Rebecca and Eliezer and the iconographic tradition of the Old Testament in the Dutch Republic, see Christian Tümpel, "Religious History Painting," in *Gods, Saints, and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Albert Blankert et al. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit Institute of Arts; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Washington D.C., 1980), 45–54; Volker Manuth, "Ikonographische Studien zu den Historien des Alten Testaments bei Rembrandt und seiner frühen Amsterdamer Schule" (Ph.D. diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 1987); Christian Tümpel, ed., *Het oude testament in de schilderkunst van de gouden eeuw* (Exh.

cat. Amsterdam, Joods Historisch Museum; Jerusalem, Israel Museum) (Amsterdam, 1991–92); and Volker Manuth, “Denomination and Iconography: The Choice of Subject Matter in the Biblical Painting of the Rembrandt Circle,” *Simiolus* 22, no. 4 (1993): 235–52.

2. Bol depicted a similar belted sash in this catalogue’s *Angel Appearing to Elijah*; see FB-104.
3. “And so it came to pass, as the camels had done drinking, that the man took a golden earring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold” (Gen. 24:22).
4. Technical investigation has shown that the canvas has been trimmed only slightly along the right edge. Cusping of the canvas was found along the right and lower edges. See the Technical Summary.
5. For the significance of Rebecca as a model of female virtue, see Netty van de Kamp, “Die Genesis: Die Urgeschiede und die Geschiede der Erzvater,” in *Het oude testament in de schilderkunst van de gouden eeuw*, ed. Christian Tümpel (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Joods Historisch Museum; Jerusalem, Israel Museum) (Amsterdam, 1991–92), 34–36; Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (Zwolle, 1986), 107–9, 319–21.

On the other hand, Rebecca was interpreted in some religious circles as a model of submission and obedience, whereas John Calvin (in his *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 1554) used her acceptance of jewelry from Eliezer as a warning against worldliness. See Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (Zwolle, 1986), 319–20, who cites the example of Jan Taffin’s *Boetveerdicheyt des levens*, published in Haarlem in 1613, and Albert Blankert’s discussion of the theme in “Rembrandt’s Impact,” in *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact*, ed. Albert Blankert et al. (Exh. cat. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria; Canberra, National Gallery of Australia) (Zwolle, 1997–98), 269–70.

6. For prints, see, for example, Dirk Volkertsz Coornhert after Maarten van Heemskerck, *Abraham’s Servant and Rebecca at the Well*, 1549, etching; Jan Saenredam after Karel van Mander, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, ca. 1580–1607, engraving; Nicolaes Cornelisz Moyaert, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, ca. 1615, etching. The title page of Rombout Jacobsen’s emblem book *Bruylofts-Dichten*, published by Claes Jansz Visscher in Amsterdam in 1616, depicts Rebecca and Eliezer at the well in one of four vignettes of biblical marriage scenes. For this example, as well as the iconography of *penningen*, see Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (Zwolle, 1986), 319–20; G. van der Meer, “Twaalf gegraveerde penningen, 17de en 18de eeuw,” in *Vereniging Rembrandt. Verslag over 1982* (Amsterdam, 1982), 62–65. A later seventeenth-century example of the latter can be found in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: Johannes Lutma II,

Rebecca by the Well, ca. 1654, silver, 7.5 cm; the opposite side shows the marriage of Rebecca and Isaac.

7. Bol's work may be one of the earliest large-scale paintings of the subject in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Maarten de Vos treated the subject in a 1562 painting, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, oil on canvas, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, whereas Willem van Nieulandt depicted the story in a small painting between 1600 and 1620 (*Landscape with Ruins and the Meeting of Rebecca and Eliezer*, oil on copper, 41.5 x 57 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Following his sixteenth-century predecessors, Nieulandt set the story in a large landscape filled with figures and narrative details. Bol's painting departs from this tradition by reducing the composition to three main figures and focusing on the figure of Rebecca.
8. Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, 6 vols. (London, 1973), nos. 491, 503, 566, 988, C30, C64, A13.
9. Attributed to Rembrandt, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, reed pen and brown ink with brown wash and white gouache, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. The close similarities that exist between the handling of the figures in this drawing and FB-106 suggest that Bol may have been its author.
10. The Darmstadt drawing exhibits an expressive distribution of light and shadow, which is also seen in FB-106.
11. See the essay for FB-104 by Peter Schatborn in this catalogue, and Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 92, 96–97, nos. 7 and 16. An important distinction between these works is their format: FB-106 is vertically oriented, while the other paintings are horizontal. The clear separation of the foreground and background in the present work was also a common compositional motif of Rembrandt's own teacher, Pieter Lastman (1583–1633). It similarly appears in *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and *Judah and Tamar*. See Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 31.
12. Also see *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, dated 1646, oil on canvas, Mansi Collection, Lucca, which similarly has a large, vertical format, with life-sized figures set in a rocky landscape. Bol gradually moved away from this style in the 1650s and 1660s as he assumed prominent public commissions, such as for Amsterdam's new Town Hall.
13. Also see note 9 for the Washington drawing. See Werner Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, ed. Walter L. Strauss (New York, 1979), 87–122, 546, no. 261. For Bol's work as a draftsman, see, most recently, Holm Bevers et al., *Drawings by Rembrandt and His Pupils: Telling the Difference* (Exh. cat. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum) (Los Angeles, 2009), 80–101.
14. After the death of their respective spouses, Bol and Anna van Erckel married in 1669. For

this portrait, see Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), no. 167; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler in vier Bänden*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983), 1: no. 150; and Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (Zwolle, 1986), 319–20, no. 80. According to the Dordrechts Museum, this painting was previously cut down on all four sides (probably in the nineteenth century). The largest surviving fragment, now believed to be in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon (*Portrait of a Young Shepherd*, oil on canvas, 102.5 x 65 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon), depicts a shepherd lying on an embankment before a forest. Dressed in a velvet beret and surrounded by sheep, he looks directly out at the viewer. Although the Dordrecht portrait can almost certainly be identified with a work described in the 1681 estate inventory of Anna van Erckel as “the likeness of the deceased and her first husband in the guise of Isaac and Rebecca in an ebony frame by Ferd. Bol,” doubts still linger about the figures’ biblical identification. The Dordrechts Museum simply titles the painting *Married Couple in a Landscape*. Joshua Bruyn shed further doubt on the identity of the sitters’ roles in a 1993 article based on the relationship between the Dordrecht painting and the Lyon fragment. He suggested that the addition of a third shepherd figure to the Dordrecht image would rule out the story of Isaac and Rebecca. Alternatively, he suggested that the image may have been intended as a pastoral portrait. The recent discovery of the Leiden Collection painting—and the close similarities in the depiction of Rebecca—may serve to quell any lingering doubts about the identity of the sitters as Isaac and Rebecca. For the Lyon fragment and its possible relationship to the Dordrecht portrait, see Hans Buijs and Mária van Berge-Gerbaud, *Tableaux flamands et hollandaise du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon* (Exh. cat. Paris, Institut Néerlandais) (Paris, 1991), no. 6; Joshua Bruyn, “Een gehistorieerde familiegroep van Ferdinand Bol: Twee fragmenten in Dordrecht en Lyon,” *Oud Holland* 108, no. 4 (1994): 208–14. For the 1681 inventory, see Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 84–85. Notably, Blankert rejected the attribution of the Lyon fragment to Bol (no. R 108).

15. For the *portrait historié*, see Rose Wishnevsky, “Studien zum *portrait historié* in den Niederlanden” (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, 1967); F. B. Polleross, *Das sakrale Identifikationsportät: Ein höfischer Bildtypus vom 13. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, 2 vols. (Worms, 1988); and more recently, Ann Jensen Adams, “The Performative *portrait historié*,” in *Pokerfaced: Flemish and Dutch Baroque Faces Unveiled*, ed. Katlijne van der Stighelen, Hannelore Magnus, and Bert Watteeuw (Turnhout, 2011), 193–214.
16. Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, who probably served an apprenticeship with Rembrandt at the same time as Bol, depicted the theme of Rebecca and Eliezer a number of times in the 1650s and 1660s: *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, ca. late 1650s/early 1660s, oil on canvas, Národní Galerie, Prague; *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, 1661, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, London. Van den Eeckhout also portrayed Eliezer’s presentation of

the gifts to Rebecca on two occasions; *Eliezer Presenting Gifts to Rebecca*, 1662, oil on canvas, Prague, Museum het Catharijneconvent, Prague, and *Eliezer Presenting Golden Armbands to Rebecca*, 1663, oil on panel, Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig. In these works, the exotically dressed figures, expansive landscape, and formal interaction between Rebecca and Eliezer lack the tenderness of Bol's painting. See Werner Sumowksi, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler in vier Bänden*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983), 2: nos. 431, 439, and 477; and Ben Broos and Rieke van Leeuwen, *Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, Isaak en Rebekka, 1665: Een nieuwe aanwinst* (The Hague, 1989). For Van den Eeckhout's drawings of the subject, see Werner Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, ed. Walter L. Strauss, 10 vols. (New York, 1979–), 3: nos. 637 and 712.

A drawing by Carel Fabritius in the Fondation Custodia, Paris, shows a dense array of figures and animals while following the compositional relationship between Rebecca and Eliezer seen in the Washington drawing. See note 9 above for the Washington drawing. For the former, see Peter Schatborn, *Rembrandt and His Circle: Drawings in the Frits Lugt Collection* (Paris, 2010), no. 77. A second drawing of this scene is in Edinburgh; *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, early 1640s, pen in brown, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh. Benesch attributed it to Rembrandt, though Schatborn later published it as by Fabritius because of its relationship to the Lugt drawing. See Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, 6 vols. (London, 1973), 3: no. 491; Peter Schatborn, *Rembrandt and His Circle: Drawings in the Frits Lugt Collection* (Paris, 2010), 200–2, fig. 38.

Paintings by Constantijn Renesse (1626–80) and Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), the latter in the Leiden Collection, on the other hand, also were conceived with tightly cropped compositions that allowed for the personal intimacy of Bol's work. Attributed to Constantijn Renesse, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*, oil on canvas, sale, Sotheby's, 22 January 2004, no. 5. Jan Victors (1619–76), Philips Koninck (1619–88), Van den Eeckhout, and De Gelder also depicted the subsequent meeting of Rebecca and Isaac, and Rembrandt depicted Rebecca and Isaac in the *Jewish Bride*, ca. 1665–69, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Provenance

- Possibly J. de Bos, Amsterdam (his sale, Amsterdam, 6 August 1810, no. 15, not sold; his



sale, Amsterdam, 6 April 1812, no. 68 [to W. Reyers for 35 florins]).

- Private collection, France (sale, Perrin-Royère-Lajeunesse, Versailles, 14 June 2009, no. 38 [to Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2009.

Exhibition History

- Paris, Musée du Louvre, November 2010–November 2015, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by the present owner].

References

- Perris-Delmas, Stéphanie. “À la une: Le Marché.” *La Gazette de l’Hôtel Drouot* 17 (2 May 2009): 5.

Technical Summary

The support is composed of two sections of fine-weight, plain-weave fabric, joined with a horizontal seam at the height of Eliezer’s shoulders, and has been lined.^[1] The tacking margins have been removed and a rectangular canvas insert has been applied to the upper right corner. There is slight cusping along the lower and right edges; no cusping but a stretcher-bar crease along the upper edge, which is tightly cropped at the top of Rebecca’s head; and no cusping or stretcher-bar crease along the left edge, which all suggests that the upper and left edges may have been trimmed.

An area measuring a few centimeters of a previously applied 20 cm-high fabric addition along the width of the upper edge was retained during the recent lining procedure, and the painting was brought back to what appears to be close to the composition’s original format. No wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils, inscriptions, or labels are located along the lining or



stretcher reverse.

A double ground, comprising a warm earth-colored lower ground followed by a white ground, has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied with thin brushstrokes of madder glazes along Eliezer's garments and with impasto along the flesh tones of the women's faces. Before the recent conservation treatment, the sheep on the extreme right had been painted out. Despite its awkward appearance, the canvas does not appear to have been cut significantly on this side, and it does not appear that the entire figure of the sheep was ever included in the picture.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was cleaned, lined, and restored in 2009 and remains in a good state of preservation.^[2]

-Annette Rupprecht