

# Three Biblical Poems

Anna Akhmatova

Translated by Jeremy N. Ingpen

## Translator's Note

Anna Akhmatova was one of the greatest poets of twentieth-century Russia. As a young woman, she visited France and Italy, where her portrait was drawn by Amedeo Modigliani. She lived through two world wars, the Stalinist terror, the Leningrad blockade and famine, and exile to Tashkent. She was banned from publishing for many years under Stalin. Her first husband was executed by the Bolsheviks and her son spent many years in the Gulag. She witnessed to the years of Stalinist terror in the poem cycle *Requiem*. She lived to an old age, seeing her complete poems published in 1965 and traveling to Oxford in 1968 to receive an honorary degree.<sup>1</sup> The French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément included Akhmatova among those Russian writers who, in the face of the Bolshevik destruction of all that was religious, created “a great Russian literature, Christian in inspiration, that inscribed the pathways of the soul into a society that was not merely secularized but marked by an aggressive form of secularism.”<sup>2</sup>

Akhmatova's three biblical poems are drawn directly from the Old Testament. Two of them, “Rachel” and

“Lot's Wife,” have been anthologized in translation. The third, “Michal,” has rarely been translated, and comes from a later collection of Akhmatova's poems.<sup>3</sup> To capture the full depth and breadth of Anna Akhmatova's work in English, we need multiple translations, which transmute or refract the inner light of her poems, and give us, each in its own way, an aspect of the multifaceted whole. Over the years, her work has been translated by Richard McKane, Amanda Haight, and Judith Hemschemeyer, among others.<sup>4</sup>

I made these translations in the early 1980s, word by word, dictionary in hand. I reviewed them ten years later with a Russian colleague in Moscow and found them to be remarkably faithful to the original. In translating I strove to keep close to the meter of the original: rhyme, in most cases, was a stretch too far. I have not tried to revise them. With the benefit of greater knowledge of Russian and the work of other translators since 1980, I am sure they could be refined. But any changes that I might make would only be echoes of the work of others, and therefore I have chosen to let them stand, as examples of the alchemy that occurs when a poem jumps off the page and begs to be translated.

<sup>1</sup> Anna Akhmatova, *Сочинения*, vol. 1, ed. Gleb Struve (Munich: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Olivier Clément, “Présentation de l'Église Orthodoxe,” unpublished manuscript (1985), 105.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Akhmatova, “Рахиль,” in *Сочинения*, 219; Anna Akhmatova, “Лотова жена,” in *Сочинения*, 220; Anna Akhmatova, “Мелхола,” in *Собрание сочинений 4* (Moscow: Эллис Лак, 1998–2005), 365–6.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Akhmatova, *Selected Poems*, trans. Richard McKane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); Amanda Haight, *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer (Somerville, MA: Zephyr Press, 1990).

## Rachel

*And Jacob served Laban seven years;  
and they were to him like a few days,  
because he loved her.  
—Genesis 29:20*

And Jacob met Rachel at the well,  
He bowed to her, as does a homeless stranger.  
The flocks had stirred up a thick dust,  
The spring was covered with an enormous stone.  
He lifted off the stone with his hands,  
And gave pure water to the sheep to drink.

But in his breast his heart began to fill with  
sadness,  
To hurt like an open wound,  
And he agreed for the maiden's sake to serve  
Seven years as a herdsman to Laban.  
Rachel! For you, by whose power  
Seven years were like seven dazzling days.

But much wisdom had the wealth-loving Laban  
And pity was not known to him.  
He thought, any deceit will be forgotten  
In the fame of Laban's household.  
And the unseeing Leah with his strong hand  
He brought to Jacob in the bridal bed.

Above the desert flowed deepest night,  
A cool dew was falling,  
And Laban's younger daughter moaned,  
Tearing her downy tresses.  
She cursed her sister and reviled God  
And summoned the Angel of Death to arrive.

And Jacob dreamed of the sweetest hour:  
The crystal clear spring of the valley,  
The lively gaze of Rachel's eyes  
And her dove-like voice:  
Jacob, did you not kiss me  
and name me your black dove?

1921

## Lot's Wife

*But Lot's wife looked back from behind him,  
And she became a pillar of salt.  
—Genesis 19:26*

And the righteous man went forth on the dark mountain,  
Behind God's messenger so large and bright.  
But loudly in his wife spoke her uneasiness:  
It is not too late, you may look back once more

On the red towers of your native Sodom,  
On the square where you sang, on the courtyard where you spun,  
On the empty windows of your many-storied house  
Where you bore children to your beloved spouse.

She glanced—and bound with deadly pain  
Her eyes could see no more;  
And her body became transparent salt,  
And her quick feet were rooted to the earth.

Who will mourn this woman?  
Was not hers the lesser grief?  
But in my heart I never will forget  
That life given over for a single glance.

1922–4



Amedeo Modigliani,  
*Anna Akhmatova*,  
1911.

## Michal

*But Michal, Saul's daughter, loved David.  
And Saul thought, I will give him to her,  
that she may be a snare to him.  
—1 Samuel 18:20–21*

And the lad plays to the demented king,  
And night is relentlessly falling,  
And loudly he summons the triumphant dawn,  
And drives back the dread apparitions.  
And the king with favor to the young boy turns:  
“How wonderfully, youngster, the fire in you burns,  
And I, for such a healing balm,  
Give you my daughter and my crown.”  
But the king's daughter looks at the singer,  
The songs and the crown are not needed for her,  
With grief and anger her soul is loaded,  
And yet Michal longs for—David.  
Pale like death, her lips compressed,  
Her green eyes with frenzy possessed,  
Her garments radiant, the harmonious sound  
Of her bracelets as she moves around,  
As in secret, in sleep, like the first mother Lilith,  
Not of her own accord she speaks:  
“Surely they gave me a poisoned drink  
And my soul became obscured.  
My shamelessness! Oh my indignity!  
A beggar! A herdsman! A thief!  
Why not indeed one of the king's courtiers,  
Alas, not someone like him?  
But the rays of the sun . . . but the stars of the night . . .  
But that cold trembling . . .”

1922–61 ❁