SBL Forum

Biblical Women and Subjectivity: From Abelard to Harriet Beecher Stowe

David M. Gunn

Biblical women have often been excluded or marginalized in the history of interpretation. Yet, as John Thompson shows, examining the record from the first century to the early seventeenth (Writing the Wrongs, 2001), such treatment is not invariable. I suggest that this qualification also pertains through the early modern and modern periods. From time to time, authors and artists have not only allowed biblical women agency, but have also construed their subjective experience in ways that situate the women prominently in the discourse. Such constructions of subjectivity, the focus of my paper, take a variety of forms, including the direct provision of speech and interior monologue, the ascription of complex motivation, and the indirect or exterior evocation of emotion and state of mind. My examples relate to characters in the book of Judges: Jephthah's daughter, Sisera's mother, Jael, and the Levite's wife. I start with one of Thompson's sources, poet and scholar Peter Abelard in twelfth-century France (see further, Thompson, 144-8), and continue with Anglican priest and man of letters Joseph Hall in Jacobean England. Among other authors and artists are Dutch painter Rembrandt in the seventeenth century, educationalist Mrs. Trimmer in the eighteenth, and, in the nineteenth century, Quaker commentator John Hoyland, popular biblical historian John Kitto, temperance leader Clara Lucas Balfour, Canadian poet William Kirby, Royal Academy artist Thomas Rooke, and novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe.
Jepthah's Daughter

Peter Abelard

In the host of discussions of Jephthah's vow and sacrifice, the daughter often becomes but a debating point. Yet she is occasionally accorded a voice. Like Pseudo-Philo centuries earlier and probably influenced by him, Peter Abelard (1079-1142) wrote a lament of the Virgins of Israel over the Daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite (Planctus Virginum Israel Super Filia Jeptae Galaditae; see Alexiou and Dronke, 1971). Abelard's ill-fated romance with Heloise haunts the poetry. At his behest, Heloise had allowed herself to be shut away as a nun, a deathly sacrifice on his behalf, to become instead the bride of Christ (see East, 1997). In his lament the young women of Israel, issuing a summons to commemorate the "pitiful victim," condemn the father's rash vow and praise the exalted daughter's noble sacrifice: "O how seldom may a man be found like unto her!" To uphold the vow of her father, through whom God saved the people, "she urges him [to cut] her own throat." Their concluding chorus sharpens the condemnation as they describe her delivering the sword herself on the steps of the kindled altar:

On her own behalf, the daughter, answering her father, takes charge from the first scene. She presses him to keep his vow. Invoking her counterpart, Isaac, she proclaims, "If God did not accept a boy, how much greater glory if he accepts a girl!" In a grim parody, her death evokes a wedding. She is silent as the weeping attendants prepare her as a bride of death. Yet at the scene's end she suddenly dispenses with the last ornaments and cries out:

In those lines she confounds what has seemed Abelard's resolute endorsement of the convention that approves her willingness to die for father and country. And as she exposes a torn response, Abelard accords her subjectivity.

Joseph Hall

Joseph Hall (1574-1656), a moderate Calvinist, was chaplain to James I and tutored Prince Henry, who died young. He later became Bishop of Exeter and then Norwich, and in turn an object of Parliament's attacks on the bishops (and was imprisoned in the Tower). A fine pulpit orator, in earlier years his satiric verse was among the first in English (Vergidemiarum, 1597-8) and he introduced the satiric "character" into English prose — earning Milton's scorn later. His famous Contemplations upon the Principal Passages of the Old Testament were published early in the seventeenth century, and editions were still appearing in the nineteenth century.

In his exposition of the Jephthah story, he gives the daughter an inner monologue as she decides to meet her victorious father, little suspecting what danger lies in "dutifull Triumph."

In his exposition of the Jephthah story, he gives the daughter an inner monologue as she decides to meet her victorious father, little suspecting what danger lies in "dutifull Triumph."

My sex forbade me to doe any thing towards the help of my father's victory; I can doe little, if I cannot applaud it: If nature have made me weake, yet not unthankful: nothing forbids my joy to bee as strong as the victors: Though I might not go out with my father to fight, yet I may meet him with gratulations; A timbrel may become these hands which were unfit for a sword; This day hath...
made me the daughter of the Head of Israel; This day hath made both Israel free, my father a conqueror, and myselfe in him noble: and shall my affection make no difference?

No day in her life seemed as happy as this, yet it "proves the day of her solemne and perpetuall mourning." Hall frames the daughter's joy and sadness with a cautionary moral: "It fals out often, that those times and occasions which promise most contentment, prove most dolefull in the issue. . . . It is good in a faire morning, to thinke of the storme that may rise ere night, and to injoy both good and evill fearfully" (Contemplations, [1615] 1634, III.x, 963). But if the daughter failed to enjoy fearfully what she thought was good, she did at least have a chance to think aloud.

Mrs. Trimmer, James Grahame
"What must be the agony of her mind, when she beheld him turning from her in an agony of distress, and heard him declare her unhappy fate?" wonders Mrs. Trimmer of the daughter who "came forth to meet her honoured parent, with every demonstration of joy and thankfulness to heaven for his success and preservation; expecting to be pressed to his fond bosom, and hoping to reward his toils with assiduous duty!" (Sacred History, [1783] 1810, II.56, 246). Mrs. Trimmer, born Sarah Kirby (1741-1810), was famous for her Fabulous Histories (later History of the Robins), which taught children to treat animals kindly. Devoted to the proper education of children, later in life she edited The Guardian of Education, a forum for review of materials and exchange of ideas. Her account of Judges is found in her Sacred History, Selected from the Scriptures; with Annotations and Reflections, Particularly Calculated to Facilitate the Study of the Holy Scriptures in Schools and Families (6th edn). Mrs. Trimmer had a lot of problems with Jephthah and empathy for the young woman.

Her contemporary, the Scottish poet James Grahame (1765-1811), conveys the daughter's shock in an unconventional way ("Jephtha's Vow," 1807 [297-98]). This Jephthah approaches his home with troubled steps. Strikingly, he is aware of what he has staked:

XXXX His vow will meet a victim in his child:
For well he knows, that, from her earliest years,
She still was first to meet his homeward steps:
Well he remembers how, with tottering gait,
She ran, and clasped his knees, and lisp'd, and look'd
Her joy . . .

He hears a song and tries to think the voice is not hers; but she emerges, foremost of the band. "Moveless he stands." He grasps his hilt and quits the hold,

XXXX And clasps, in agony, his hands, and cries,
"Alas, my daughter! thou has brought me low." —
The timbrel at her rooted feet resounds.

Up to this point the poem has consistently (and typically) followed the man's perspective and explored his consciousness. The final line, however, dramatically shifts subjectivity from him to her. The musical instrument, conventionally the signal of her joy, marks instead her inner state of shock. We are reminded of the powerful shift effected by Abelard's last couplet.

The Daughter illustrated
Illustrators have signaled her joy by her instrument, which has varied over the centuries. Kettledrums are popular from the Middle Ages, and even a triangle makes its appearance. But tambourines (also tympanum in Latin) grow to dominate nineteenth and twentieth-century illustration. One of the most arresting pictures is that by Caspar Luyken (1672-1708) (Historiae Celebriores, 1708). (ABOVE) He shows a child oblivious to the dramatic confrontation intently beating a single kettledrum, while the daughter gazes directly at her father, her fingers still strumming a lute-shaped drum tucked against her shoulder. Her companion's hands have abandoned her own drum in horror. In the same picture, then, we are offered clues to the daughter's emotions, from innocent joy (the child) to stark dismay (the companion). The daughter herself is caught in midpoint.

Other meetings, especially from the nineteenth century on, show joy through dancing, sometimes tambourine in hand (as in Esther Hewlett's Scripture History of 1828 (ABOVE), though here the line of the daughter's mouth appropriately suggests a counter emotion). Most celebrated is the dancing daughter of Gustave Doré whose illustrations (Sainte Bible, 1866; Doré Bible Gallery, 1879) reappear in numerous publications. Arms upraised in triumph, she steps over a craggy outcrop ahead of her dancing musicians.
The scene most usually evoking the daughter's emotions, however, is the mountain lament, a nineteenth-century favorite and the vehicle for large doses of pious sentiment. One painting that offers a more moving glimpse of the daughter's state of mind, and accords her subjectivity, is "Jephthah: The Days of Mourning" by Thomas Rooke (1842-1942), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1882 (ABOVE). Rooke produced a series of Old Testament paintings, including also "The Vow's Fulfilment" (exhibited 1872). In the latter, the hunched-over young woman, head buried in her arms and clearly flinching from the expected blow, kneels atop a pyre. Jephthah, knife in hand, invokes heaven, but whether for a stay in execution or its blessing we do not know. In the mourning scene, the daughter stands apart from her grieving companions, head bent, tucking her cheek against her grasped hands, deep in thought or sadness. Spreading trees offer cover, and plants survive in the parched ground. This daughter is both supported and terribly alone.

**Sisera's Mother**

*William Kirby*

Sisera's mother is generally the object of scorn. Occasionally, however, she finds sympathy. In one case, the pathos of another historical scene is transferred to her, so that indirectly she becomes a sentient being, feeling and hoping, tragically caught in a situation not of her making. Canadian William Kirby (1817-1906) writes his pride at being a son of Britain (from Yorkshire) into his poem of Canadian resistance to a U.S. attack in the War of 1812 (*Canadian Idyls*, 1880). The setting is a mansion on Lake Ontario. A lovely girl ("Canadian of an English stock") looks from the lattice and cries to her mother to listen to the sounds of battle: "O, Great God! / Who gives us fathers, brothers, for our love, / Who cannot die for them, as they for us!" So the women stood:

XXXX Pale-lipped, with eyes that just held back the tears,
Like Sisera's mother at the lattice, far
Gazing along the hills, crying in pain,
"Why come no tidings? Have our men not sped?
Our loyal men who went down to the fight . . .
For King and country dying, if they must!
While their true women hope, and fear, and trust,
And deck their chambers with the freshest flowers,
And spread the couches soft for their repose,
Sharing their weal and woe unto the end."

But evening came, and night,

And still they watched; those faithful women all,
Till morn returned, when every flower and tree
Watered the earth with dripping dew, like tears,
As over some great sorrow that befell.

(From Mrs. S. T. Martyn, Women of the Bible, 1868)

Jael

As he does with Jephthah's daughter, Joseph Hall gives Jael an interior monologue, like a Shakespearean soliloquy. While Sisera doubtless dreams of battle, Jael, "seeing his temples lie so faire, as if they invited the naile and hammer," entertains the execution:

What if I strike him? And yet, who am I that I should dare to thinke of such an act? Is not this Sisera, the famousest Captaine of the world, whose name hath wont to be fearefull to whole Nations? What if my hand should swarve in the stroke? What if he should awake, whiles I am lifting up this instrument of death? What if I should be surprised by some of his followers whiles the fact is green, and yet bleeding?

In like manner she runs the gamut of possibilities. Could the murder be hidden? Could her heart allow such treachery — Was there not peace between her house and him? Had she not extended him hospitality? But are these not the idle fancies of civility? Is not Sisera at defiance with God, a tyrant to Israel? Is it for nothing that God has brought him into her tent? May she now repay Israel for the kindness shown her...
grandfather Jethro? Does God not offer her the honor of rescuing his people? "Hath God bidden me strike, and shall I hold my hand? No, Sisera, sleepe now thy last, and take here this fallall reward of all thy cruelty and oppression." Hall conjures up a clever, fast thinking, decisive woman.

Like others in the seventeenth century and later, Hall is sure God was in charge: "Hee that put this instinct into her heart, did put also strength into her hand; Hee that guided Sisera to her Tent, guided the nayle thorow his temples." Thus one might argue that he undercut her agency, and with it her subjectivity, as fast as he constructs it. Yet that argument would deny agency to all, male and female, who are conceived by a theology of divine sovereignty to be instruments of God. I think it is more complex than that. Hall, while affirming God's primary agency, affirms also Jael's rehearsal of the possibilities lying before her. She makes a choice, even if prompted (Contemplations, [1615] 1634, III.ix, 944-5).

Jael illustrated

Sustaining positive approval of Jael was her place in the popular lists of "strong women." In Philips Galle's print suite (c.1600) from designs by Marten de Vos (1532-1603), she is commended for her opportune perforation of the unjust enemy Sisera, a deed of daring making her name famous (or notorious!). She sits daintily, one leg tucked in behind the other, brandishing a mallet in her right hand and looking down, with the ghost of a smile at a large and viciously pointed tent pin in her left hand. In a background scene she kneels in traditional pose beside the sleeping Sisera, pin against his temple and mallet aloft (ABOVE). This is an independent woman who has her own outlook on life, which we are invited to share.

Motives
To many, then, despite her "horrid and unnatural" act, Jael remained a model for faith. That a divine impulse explained her deed is widely understood in nineteenth-century literature; and in so delivering Israel from oppression, she deserved Deborah's blessing (cf. Teacher's Pictorial Bible, c.1870; or James S. Forsyth, Women of the Bible, 1896, 53-4). At worst, given the text's silence about her motives, "circumstances" could be inferred that "the Spirit of God has not thought proper to disclose," circumstances sufficient to justify an otherwise inexplicable proceeding (Sacred Biography, 1818, 298). Motives, however, were not in short supply. She may have suffered under Sisera herself, or been moved by patriotism (if an Israelite) or gratitude towards Israel, or been aware of just how "atrocious" was Sisera's character (Calmet's Dictionary, 6th edn, 1837; cf. James Gardner, Christian Cyclopaedia, 1858, 552). Convinced, like most, that Jael was ordained to execute divine judgment, Mrs. Trimmer seeks in her "critical situation" the clue to her immediate motivation. Had she refused Sisera shelter, he would most probably have killed her, or he might later have prevailed against Israel and slaughtered many — whereas by "cutting him off" she would complete Barak's victory, fulfill God's will, and gain highest honor for delivering the oppressed people from the dread general (Sacred History, [1783] 1810, II.49, 215). With this sympathetic search for motivation, we are on the path to subjectivity.

John Hoyland
A distinctive explanation starts to make its appearance. Close consideration of Jael's immediate situation
also spurs the Quaker historian John Hoyland (1750-1831) of Sheffield in Yorkshire. Jael's is a "deed of horror." But the poem's conclusion accounts both "for her conduct, and for the warmth of the strains with which this act was celebrated [in Deborah's song]."

XXXX The wretched females of the vanquished people usually became a prey to the brutal lust of the victors. This was a case so common, that the mother of Sisera, and her wise ladies, are represented as so lost to female delicacy and compassion, as to exult at the idea of assigning the virgins of Israel to Sisera and his soldiers, as mere instruments of a brutal pleasure: ". . . Have they not divided the prey, to every man a damsel or two? . . ." May we not suppose both Jael and Deborah, animated with righteous indignation against the intended violaters of their sex? (Epitome of the History of the World, 1812, I, 477-8)

Clara Lucas Balfour
Clara Lucas Balfour (1808-1878), a stalwart of the English temperance movement, takes a similar path (Women of Scripture, 1847, 99-102). Despite Jael's violation of what was understood in the nineteenth century to be a terrible breach of an inviolate "oriental" code of hospitality. Deborah's enthusiastic approval of Jael is best understood, she urges, in context. The speech of Sisera's mother and her wise ladies alludes to the fate, "far worse than death," from which the Hebrew damsels had been rescued. "Humiliations of the most degrading kind" had been averted. Little wonder "this mother in Israel should praise the treacherous and cruel act of Jael, looking less at the terrific deed than its consequences." Here Balfour adduces the support of Joseph Hall's interior monologue: "If a Christian Divine in modern times could write thus of such a fearful act . . . we shall cease to wonder that a Hebrew prophetess, whose people had by that act been delivered from countless miseries and dangers, should have extolled it." Yet her unease has the final word: "Happy are we that our pure and holy Christianity appeals to our nobler feelings, and recognises pardon, love, and peace, as the divine attributes of our faith and practice."

John Kitto
Englishman John Kitto (1804-1854), widely traveled in the Holy Land and alert to oriental custom, is disturbed by Jael's violation of the code of hospitality. In The Pictorial Sunday Book (1845, 171), however, he allows for a political act. Jael realized her itinerant tribe's safety depended on its standing with the most powerful host nation; with Jabin's power ended, that meant the Israelites, who would be grievously offended to find their enemy in Heber's tent. "And found he would be." By anticipating Sisera's end, she could "avert all evil from the house of Heber" and "make the now powerful Israelites its firmest friends."

Imaginatively, a year later in his Bible History (which in an 1867 edition was widely read in the United States), Kitto had considered that Barak, on seeing the slain Sisera, "might then have pondered whether, had Sisera been the victor and himself the fugitive, the same fate might not have been his own." Kitto had not considered that Jael might likewise have wondered whether, failing action, her fate might not have been similar. But in his Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature (1846, "Jael") he views more closely the woman's predicament. Recognizing, like Hoyland, that the victor's despoiling of the vanquished was a common occurrence, not confined to Canaanites, he relates this fact specifically to Jael's own situation. "Molestation" and "rather rough treatment" by the Israelites is what he sees in store for her camp and what her deed averted, and there is no disputing Deborah's unqualified praise. He therefore revisits Jael's motives in this "painful transaction" and finds them "entirely prudential."

Harriet Beecher Stowe
The "molestation" argument, moreover, is not lost on Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), of Uncle Tom's Cabin fame. She turns the argument against Jael, drawn from oriental customs of hospitality, on its head. Jael's deed, she says, "has been exclaimed over by modern sentimentalists as something very shocking"; yet, she notes, when recently an Austrian "tyrant" who had "outraged noble Hungarian and Italian women" was himself "lynched" by the brewers of London, "shouts of universal applause went up." A woman "cannot meet her destroyer in open, hand-to-hand conflict," so must seek other means. "Deborah saw, in the tyrant thus overthrown, the ravisher and brutal tyrant of helpless woman, and she extolled the spirit by which Jael had entrapped the ferocious beast, whom her woman's weakness could not otherwise have subdued" (Woman in Sacred History, 1873, 102).

On Deborah's blessing of Jael, Stowe follows in the steps of Hoyland and Balfour, but looking first to the outrages that must already have happened at Sisera's hands during the years of oppression. "It is a woman driven to the last extreme of indignation at outrages practiced on her sex that thus rejoices." Hence the energy of her blessing on the woman who dared deliver. "When the tiger who has slain helpless women and children is tracked to his lair, snared, and caught, a shout of exultation goes up." By "an exquisite
touch," through the words of Sisera’s mother, the poetess reminds the reader of what, but for this nail of Jael, would have been "the fate of all Judaean women." And in the reckoning of this haughty princess, "a noble Judaean lady, with her gold embroideries and raiment of needle-work, is only an ornament meet for the neck of the conqueror, — a toy, to be paraded in triumph" (105). Here, then, is a Jael alive to dire threat, acting to avert becoming but an ornament for the neck of a conqueror.

Curiously, the outspoken women’s movement leader, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), is less sure of her direction (The Woman’s Bible, 1898, II, 20-1). She echoes the common condemnation of Jael, whose deception and cruelty "is revolting under our code of morality" and "seems more like the work of a fiend than of a woman." The best the critic could do is acknowledge that Deborah and Barak in their hour of victory did not neglect to honor Jael for what "they considered" an heroic deed. As for Jael, she no doubt "imagined herself" in the line of duty, specially called by the Lord. Cady Stanton’s Jael is but a pale shadow of Hall’s instrument of God, without the alert mind and steely resolve.

**Postscript: The Levite’s wife**

If Mrs. Trimmer had a problem writing about the rape and dismemberment of the Levite’s wife, the more so did Bible illustrators in picturing the events. The usual solution was to do as she did and pass them over.

There are, of course, notable exceptions. For example, the influential series in the great print-Bible of 1700, published by Pieter Mortier (1661-1711), includes the scene of dismemberment. O. Elgers, the designer, depicts a curiously empty and almost bloodless carcase, of uncertain gender. It is as though he has dared the picture, but shied away from the fundamental detail, that this is a man chopping up his wife (ABOVE).

Two hundred years later the Frenchman (Jacques) James Tissot (1830-1902), who illustrated a complete Old Testament in English (1904), devotes several scenes to Judges 19-21, including "The Levite’s Wife Dies at the Door." She lies alone on the cobbled stones, eyes open, staring or dead. Another scene of his borrows from a painting of "the Levite and his dead wife," by Jean-Jacques Henner (1829-1905), which won a Medal of Honor at the 1898 Salon. Henner depicts the woman supine and naked on a slab, her body deathly white against surrounding darkness. Behind her, merging into the gloom, the Levite broods. One critic sees here the artist brooding over the fate of his native Alsace-Lorraine, lost to France after the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871). In the Levite’s loss and desire for retribution, the artist saw "a parallel with the feelings of those whose homeland was dismembered" (Mühlberger, 1991, 115). The woman has become, then, a cipher for national politics. Tissot’s version (BELOW) is both more mundane (no dramatic lighting) and
more brutal. Now the Levite stands between viewer and laid out body, an apron pulled around his waist, like a butcher. He leans on the table, head bent forward, the fingers of his right hand resting just an inch from a long butcher’s knife. A shallow bowl comes into focus in the foreground. It is hard to see the woman as other than object.

Rembrandt

Tissot also shows the woman sitting glumly in the Gibeah square, while the elderly sojourner invites the Levite. Again she stares, ignoring their conversation. That painting may owe a debt to a 1645 drawing (pen and wash) by Rembrandt (1606-1669) now in the British Museum (BELOW).

While the Levite and Ephraimite talk, the woman sits wearily resting her head against hand, elbow propped on a large trunk. A toddler peers over the valise she sits on. The talking men, the tired woman lost in her thoughts, the luggage, and the child, all are part of an ordinary world. It would be a touching scene by itself. But Rembrandt has framed it with a textual world that lies outside. We become painfully aware of her, wish to warn her, begin to live her future horror. Her subjectivity saturates the picture. For the viewer who knows what is to come, this is probably the most awful picture of all.

David M. Gunn, Texas Christian University, d.gunn@tcu.edu

The small woodcuts by the main headings are from the famous Illuminated Bible, New York: Harper and
Brothers, 1846 This paper draws upon material in my reception-history commentary: Judges, Blackwell Bible Commentaries, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005

Bibliography


Doré, Gustave, illus. 1866. La Sainte Bible. Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils.


Kirby, William. 1880. Canadian Idyls, IV. Toronto: Briggs


Tissot, J. James. 1904. The Old Testament: Three Hundred and Ninety-six Compositions Illustrating the Old