

A Portrait of Jephthah's Daughter: Finding the Female Gaze

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Painting: "Elizabeth's Gethsemane Moment" by Caitlyn Shipp

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Abstract

*Judges 11:29-40 is among the most disturbing texts in the Hebrew Bible. It conveys the gruesome story about Jephthah's daughter who becomes the victim of her father's vow to YHWH, sacrificing whoever greets him first in return for victory in battle. Many biblical scholars in their laudable attempts to recover her within Scripture's patriarchal lens contextualize the world behind and within the text. However, scholars are restrained, relying on the narrator's male gaze and decision to bind her nameless identity to her father. While Scripture's male testimony remains critical to constructing her portrait, it does not need to be limited to it. In the story's reception history, only nineteenth-century artists singly capture the woman herself freeing her association with Jephthah on the canvas. Artists such as James Jacques Joseph Tissot's *Jephthah's Daughter* and Tom Roberts' *A Study of Jephthah's Daughter* imagine her reaction to the news of her impending death. While their depictions of Jephthah's daughter attempt to distance her from the male gaze, the paintings evoke the viewer to embody Jephthah's eyes. However, there remains an unexplored female gaze lingering in the background, the voices of the text's silent women who stood behind Jephthah's daughter. They danced with her, but they were not the first to greet him. From their gaze, one can begin to imaginatively construct the unnamed woman. In my portrait of Jephthah's daughter titled, *Elizabeth's Gethsemane Moment*, relies upon biblical scholarship as well as the insights extrapolated from Tissot and Roberts' portraits to create the female gaze from the perspective of the women who stood behind her. This paper argues that imagining the female gaze reveals an empowering Christofornic woman who lays down her life in the place of the expendable.*

Judges 11:29-40 is among the most disturbing texts in the Hebrew Bible. It conveys the gruesome story about Jephthah's daughter, who becomes the victim of her father's vow to YHWH to sacrifice whoever greets him first in return for victory in battle. Many biblical scholars in their laudable attempts to recover her within Scripture's patriarchal lens contextualize

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the world behind and within the text. However, scholars are restrained, relying on the narrator's male gaze and decision to bind her nameless identity to her father. While Scripture's male testimony remains critical to constructing her portrait, it does not need to be limited to it. In the historical reception of the story, only nineteenth-century artists singly capture the woman herself, freeing her association with Jephthah on the canvas. Artists such as James Jacques Joseph Tissot's *Jephthah's Daughter* and Tom Roberts' *A Study of Jephthah's Daughter* imagine her reaction to the news of her impending death. While their depictions of Jephthah's daughter attempt to distance her from the male gaze, the paintings evoke the viewer to embody Jephthah's eyes.

However, there remains an unexplored female gaze lingering in the background: namely, the voices of the text's silent women who stood behind Jephthah's daughter. They danced with her, but they were not the first to greet him. From their gaze, one can begin to imaginatively construct the unnamed woman. In my portrait of Jephthah's daughter titled *Elizabeth's Gethsemane Moment*, I relied upon biblical scholarship as well as the insights extrapolated from Tissot and Roberts' portraits to create the female gaze from the perspective of the women who stood behind her. Imagining the female gaze reveals an empowering Christoformic woman who lays down her life in the place of the expendable.

The subject and its interpreter comprise a portrait; it is the *gazed-upon* and the *gazer* captured in a single piece. Throughout the centuries, artistic depictions of Jephthah's daughter illustrate the violent scene of sacrifice and mourning with her fellow virgins in the mountains; however, Tissot and Roberts' portraits depict her alone. Both Tissot and Roberts' portraits of Jephthah's daughter lend themselves to a feminist interpretation by depicting her identity as separate from her father and her virginal status. However, despite their artistic choice, she is still

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left without a name. The only indication of her identity is in the titles of the paintings, which link her identity to her father. Furthermore, Jephthah's absence from the scene allows the viewer to embody Jephthah's gaze as he watches his beautiful virgin daughter, filled with joy, and realizes what he has done. Roberts' portrait attempts to turn from the male gaze, positioning her away from the viewer, speaking to her nameless identity. Yet, her portrait remains in the male gaze of the viewer embodying her father and of her male artist alike.

In my painting, I reattempt Tissot and Roberts' effort to distance her from the male gaze by evoking the viewer to embody the gaze of the women who danced behind her. The viewer only sees the back of her head, speaking to her nameless identity. Jephthah confesses to his brash vow and consequently begins to disappear. Derived from biblical scholarship on the prolongation of a fulfilled life, Jephthah's waning presence exhibits his metaphorical death. The prolongation of a fulfilled life comes "in the form of descendants... It also comes in the form of the survival of the decedent's 'name' (*shem*)."¹ A name embodies the essence of a person, the sum of his deeds and lasting impact on others. In other words, "The name or the memory... survives the person or, to put it more precisely, the person survives in the name as in the descendants."² Jephthah survives battle only to *kill* himself by killing his daughter. The literary repetition of his daughter's virginity and that she is his only child emphasize the tragic fact that Jephthah will have no descendants who can immortalize his name (Judg 11:34; 37-39). In a sense, there are two deaths in this story; only one is bodily. In my painting, his metaphorical death begins at the confession of his vow. While the focal point of Tissot and Roberts' portraits is the reaction of Jephthah's daughter, the focal point of my piece is the silent words that break their relationship.

¹ Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, "Who Goes to Sheol—and Who Does Not," in *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews*, 69–80 (Yale University Press, 2008), 77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1np81t.9>.

² Madigan and Levenson, "Who Goes to Sheol," 77.

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Jephthah's sinful vow not only breaks his relationship with his daughter in the most permanent way by victimizing her but breaks his relationship with YHWH. While the spirit of YHWH was with Jephthah, God soon falls silent (Judg 11:29).

My painting situates the sacrificial table above Jephthah and his daughter. It too is broken, further symbolizing their relationship and embodying the consequence of his vow. Additionally, it illustrates how Jephthah's brash vow is not the will of YHWH. David Janzen asserts that the portrayal of sacrifice fits within the book of Judges' narrative pattern of moral decline and identifies the story as integral and interconnected to the theme of caution to not act as foreigners do. As the story of the tribe of Ephraim, who act like the Ammonites, the story of Jephthah's sacrifice serves to denounce his actions. Jephthah's "foreign sacrifice accompanies foreign morality."³ The spirit of YHWH does not remain with Jephthah (Judg 11:29). Clark-Soles expounds, "God's absence from these narratives signals that Israel is in a covenantal breach space."⁴ Roberts' portrait agrees with biblical scholarship that Jephthah's vow is against YHWH's will. In Christian art, crossed arms over the chest according to Wilberding is a liturgical gesture, connoting humility and obedience.⁵ This gesture "often occurs in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Annunciation scenes."⁶ It also occurs in depictions of Christ's submission to crucifixion.⁷ Roberts employs this pose by drawing upon its biblical artistic use throughout the centuries and its association with the Annunciation and Passion. As an Annunciation and Passion symbol, the position of her hands in this piece suggests her obedience not only to her father but

³ David Janzen, "Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 3 (March 2005): 355, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089205052681>.

⁴ Jaime Clark-Soles, *Women in the Bible: Interpretation Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 78.

⁵ Erick Wilberding, "Embracing the Cross: A Liturgical Gesture," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 8, no. 2 (1989): 1–5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23202528>, 1.

⁶ Wilberding, "Embracing the Cross," 1.

⁷ Wilberding, "Embracing the Cross," 2.

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to the vow made to YHWH. However, unconventional to the liturgical gesture which has its subject facing the viewer, Roberts turns this gesture away from the viewer. In this case, the pose serves as irony.

YHWH did not request Jephthah to vow anything, let alone make a vow at the possible expense of his daughter. Janzen explains, "wrong sacrifice will always reflect a rejection of YHWH's authority and therefore of the authority of YHWH's law."⁸ Jephthah displaces his rejection of YHWH's authority onto his daughter, leaving her to choose between repeating his sin or death. Fuchs articulates, "Jephthah's daughter would be implicitly challenging Yahweh's authority as well, for the vow was made to him, and she is the means of realizing it."⁹ On the sacrificial table in my painting, the name Elizabeth is written in Hebrew. While her fellow virgins did well to lament, giving her life by remembering her story, Scripture forgot her name. I chose to name Jephthah's daughter Elizabeth because it means *God is my oath*, contrasting her oath with that of Jephthah; in this manner, I will refer to Jephthah's Daughter as Elizabeth in this paper. His oath is not out of love for YHWH but is rather a bargain to sacrifice someone expendable in return for victory in battle, selfishly hoping to improve his status within the community and gain their full acceptance (Judg 11:2-3; 7-10). Conversely, Elizabeth becomes Christoformic, dying in the place of another. Her oath is caring for YHWH in the expendable.

Leaving Elizabeth with few options, scholars examine her choices in the situation. In my painting, the mountains above Elizabeth's head symbolize her exploitation of the only authority she has left, negotiating time to lament. Both Tissot and Roberts' portraits do not depict her options, only Roberts hints at her defiance. Their pieces are about her *reaction* rather than her

⁸ Janzen, "Why the Deuteronomist," 355.

⁹ Esther Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing the Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 126.

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action in the situation. However, biblical scholarship has much to say about her possible options. Mieke Bal argues that her limitation within the patriarchy left her with the only option of submitting to her father. However, “she exploits the possibility left open to her” by lamenting her virginity for two months in solidarity with her female companions.¹⁰ Valerie Cooper expands Elizabeth's choices between death and dishonor. She expresses, “to accept her father's words meant certain death, but to reject her father's rash vow meant to declare a fool the man all of Israel had once before rejected and then to run, with no place to hide.”¹¹ Opposing a simplistic dichotomous reading of Elizabeth as a powerless female victim against the oppressive patriarchy, Danna Fewell suggests “Jephthah's vow was most likely made at Mizpah and not necessarily in secret. The daughter could very well have known the substance of her father's bargain. Indeed, when she responds to her father, she seems quite aware of what his vow entails... one might hear a tone of ironic judgment.”¹² If this is true, then she stepped in to take the place of someone whom her father considered expendable. While it does not make the story less tragic, this reading bestows power back to Elizabeth, transforming her from a victim to a hero.

Fewell's interpretation, in conjunction with crafting the female gaze from the women who danced behind Elizabeth, produces a portrait of a Christoformic woman who lays down her life in the place of the expendable. Compared to Christ dying in the place of sinners, Elizabeth dies in the place whom her father thought to be disposable. Fewell's reading suggests that she knew her impending death. In Elizabeth's own Gethsemane moment, she takes time to mourn her life and future that will never be. She could have refused to return, following through with her father's vow, but she bravely faces the consequence of a sin that was not hers. She too

¹⁰ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 116.

¹¹ Bellis, *Helpmates*, 117.

¹² Bellis, *Helpmates*, 117.

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experiences a type of resurrection by the people who remember her. Implementing Tissot's imagery of dying music, her hand turned out as her fingers no longer beat the drum, I mounted my painting to a tambourine. It recalls her dance to meet Jephthah, the music acting as the language of memory. Upon picking up my painting, one hears the music again, remembering her story.

Elizabeth's Gethsemane Moment is the dialogue between the culmination of biblical scholarship and the text's nineteenth-century artistic reception history. My piece recognizes biblical scholarship's limitations, its dependence on Scripture's inherently male gaze and on the patriarchal culture that interprets the lives of women in Scripture. Portraits are as much about the subject as they are about the artist that gazes upon them. It is important to recover the female gaze, since it lends itself to unveiling an inspiring Christoformic woman. The male gaze sees her as a helpless, innocent virgin daughter while the female gaze envisions a brave young woman facing death in the place of another. *Elizabeth's Gethsemane Moment* seeks to name the unnamable, depict the undescribed, and revive the dead.

Fewell's interpretation illuminates a Christoformic woman; it is Elizabeth in the eyes of her friends. While nineteenth-century painting receptions of Elizabeth are unique from other works by freeing her identity from her father and virginity to focus on the woman herself, it remains in the male gaze of her father and her male painters. However, Roberts' piece agrees with Fewell's Christoformic imagining of Elizabeth by conveying that her father's vow is against the will of YHWH, using a hand gesture symbol associated with Christ and having her turn away with it. Biblical scholarship and nineteenth-century artistic reception history, along with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, aid in discovering and creating the female gaze present in Judges

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11:29-40. The eyes of the women who stood behind her reveal a glance of love for a friend who took their place in death. In their eyes lies a portrait of Jephthah's daughter, Elizabeth.

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