

## LOOKING THROUGH THE WINDOW: FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

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The window is a recurrent motif in literature (and art) since antiquity.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, the window allows and sometimes invites the outsider or viewer to “intrude” into the private space of someone else and satisfy their curiosity or even voyeuristic interest. On the other hand, it allows someone cloistered inside to look out to see the real world. Both of these are at play in the story of Isaac and Rebekah’s move to Gerar.

Isaac and Rebekah traveled to the Philistine city of Gerar because of a famine (Gen 26:8). In order to save his life, Isaac asked his wife to pass herself off as his sister.<sup>2</sup> The couple lived together peacefully until *Abimelech king of the Philistines looked through the window, and he saw Isaac being playful<sup>3</sup> with his wife Rebecca* (Gen 26:8). Unlike in the case of Abram and Sarai, Abimelech did not have Rebekah immediately brought to him.

Through which window was Abimelech looking? One option is through the window of his own house (his palace), and the other option is through the window of Isaac’s house. The use of the modifying phrase *king of the Philistines* seems to indicate that the looking was done from Abimelech’s window, most likely the one in the outer court of the royal palace, at which the king showed himself to the people on ceremonial occasions.<sup>4</sup> Palaces are large, with sizeable windows, often high up. Thus, Abimelech would have had an excellent view of many houses.<sup>5</sup>

However, since being “playful” with his wife is behavior that one does not do with his sister, it is difficult to believe Isaac was having sex in an easily visible place such that someone sitting in his own house or passing by on the street could see through the window, but rather it was a display of affection that would indicate they weren’t siblings. As Hermann Gunkel notes: “The very idyllic scene is probably to be envisioned as follows. Isaac and Abimelech live across from each other on a narrow alley where one can see from the window of one house into the other.”<sup>6</sup>

Rabbinic literature discusses the legal implications of making or enlarging a window over a neighbor’s courtyard, Mishna *Baba Batra* 3:7 states, “In a joint courtyard, a person may not make a door facing another person’s door or a window facing another window.” Their concern was that such an opening would infringe on a neighbor’s right to privacy, a concept known in rabbinic literature as “damage through seeing.”<sup>7</sup> At issue was the distinction of the “public” and “private” domains and how they impinge upon each other.

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Regardless of which window Abimelech used to “see in” to Isaac and Rebekah, the story makes use of an additional motif prominent in biblical texts: using a window “to see out.” Abimelech was spending time peering down from his upper-story window in curiosity. What Abimelech observed was enlightening, since once he saw Isaac and Rebekah being “playful” he realized that he had been tricked and understood the complete picture, preventing him from committing adultery. For Abimelech, the window was empowering, granting him access to new and correct knowledge of the world outside his palace.

Unlike the Abimelech narrative where Abimelech was looking through the window, Daniel, another high-ranking male was entrapped by his enemies looking through a window and saw Daniel praying. This took place when Daniel was a triumvir under Darius the Mede, and the king was considering placing him in sole charge of the empire (Dan. 6:4). His rivals, taking advantage of Daniel’s uncompromising piety, persuaded the king to promulgate a decree forbidding anyone to address a petition to any being but the king for 30 days (Dan. 6:8). The plotters knew that Daniel would not dispense with praying on his knees three times daily at open windows. They maneuvered the king into a position in which he was compelled, to his dismay, to order Daniel thrown into a lion pit.

In the Abimelech story and the Daniel narrative, the person(s) who learned the truth by looking through the window was a man. This biblical motif, however, works for women as well. When it is used for women, it highlights an inside-outside dichotomy, that is, the woman’s passivity and her inability to get the full picture of what is occurring in the bright space of the outside world just by peering through the window from the shadow of her home.

The female version of the window motif found literary expression in the biblical portrayals of three aristocratic women looked who out at a man’s world, but were not fully aware of the implications of what it held in store for them. The book of Judges tells the story of Israel’s war with Jabin, king of the Canaanite city Hazor, and his powerful general Sisera. The prophetess Deborah and her chosen military commander, Barak ben Abinoam, led the battle, and Sisera’s army was defeated. Judges 5 records a song sung by Deborah about this battle, including a final description of the scene in which the mother of Sisera was waiting for her heroic son to come home: *Through the window peered Sisera’s mother, behind the lattice she gazed. ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?’ The wisest of her ladies give answer; She, too, replies to herself: ‘They must be dividing the spoil they have found: one womb, two wombs for each man. Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, spoil of embroidered cloths, a couple of embroidered cloths round every neck as spoil’* (Judg 5: 30).<sup>8</sup>

Another aristocratic woman looking out a window is Michal, the daughter of King Saul and wife of King David, who was living in the royal palace in Jerusalem. Saul’s hatred of David is the backdrop to 1 Sam 19:11–17. Knowing her father’s plan to kill David, Michal

warns him and helps him escape. She lowers David through the window (v 12), makes the bed look as if he is still in it (v 13), and twice lies to Saul—first saying David is sick (v 14) and then insisting that David threatened her into helping him (v 17): *Saul sent messengers to David's home to keep watch on him and to kill him in the morning. But David's wife Michal told him, "Unless you run for your life tonight, you will be killed tomorrow." Michal let David down from the window and he escaped and fled* (1 Sam 19:11-12).

The use of a window by Michal in 1 Sam 19:12 is almost identical to Rahab's in Josh. 2:15: both women lowered the protagonist to safety at danger to themselves and as a traitor to their native homeland rulers.

The second narrative concerning Michal looking out a widow is in 2 Sam 6:16–23, the entry of the Ark into Jerusalem. Looking out the window, Michal, *the daughter of Saul*, sees David dancing before the incoming Ark and despises him (v 16). After criticizing David for his behavior, Michal herself is rebuked (vv 20–22). Following this harsh interchange, the narrator notes that Michal, *the daughter of Saul*, remained childless until her death (v 23).

In this narrative, David was bringing the Ark of the Covenant from the house of Ovededom to Jerusalem. The previous attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem failed, and God got angry at one of the participants and struck him down. David managed the proceedings, showing as much joy as possible. Michal, however, saw the matter differently: *As the Ark of the Lord entered the City of David, Michal, daughter of Saul, looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the Lord; and she despised him for it* (2 Sam 6:16).

In her perception, her husband, the current king, was dancing in the street half naked “like a commoner” and chastised him for it: *Didn't the king of Israel do himself honor today, exposing himself today in the sight of the slave girls of his subjects, as one of the riffraff might expose himself!* (2 Sam 6:20). David responded harshly: *“It was before the Lord who chose me instead of your father and all his family and appointed me ruler over the Lord's people Israel! I will dance before the Lord and dishonor myself even more, and be low in your esteem; but among the slave girls that you speak of I will be honored”* (2 Sam 6:22).

Michal's window motif forms an inclusio: she saves David at the outset via the window, and loses him in the end via the window. Adele Berlin has noted that Michal seemingly defies conventional ideas of biblical women by acting with agency in various situations. For example: Berlin notes her “aggressive and physical” characterization in the narrative.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Michal “saves” David by physically lowering him out of a window, staging his sickness, and lying to her father.<sup>10</sup>

Michal died childless (2 Sam 6:23). For Michal the punishment was both a sexual tragedy and a family tragedy, since it meant that no children would be born to one of the few surviving offspring of Saul's house.<sup>11</sup>

The third royal woman looking out the window is Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab and the queen mother of King Joram. The Bible presents a thoroughly negative picture of this undoubtedly powerful woman. According to Brenner,<sup>12</sup> Jezebel had two sources of power. The first was her status in her Phoenician homeland. As daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, she was a princess by birth. According to Josephus,<sup>13</sup> Ethbaal was also a priest in the Phoenician cult of the goddess Astarte. Brenner suggests that Phoenicia followed the Mesopotamian practice of appointing the king's daughter as the high priestess of the chief local god, in this case, Baal Melqart. With the king as high priest and his daughter serving as high priestess, links between the monarchy and the state religion were considerably strengthened. Together, the two were able to wield substantial political, economic, and religious power over the land. As a result, when Jezebel came to Israel she was accustomed to being an active participant in government. She promoted the cult of Baal, which had long enjoyed extensive support in Israel, since her status as the god's high priestess was integral to her authority as queen.

Another power base was derived from her husband, Ahab. In spite of the negative bias of the Deuteronomistic framework, the texts reveal that she was an active partner in her husband's rule. Her religious and political skills made her a natural colleague in his administration.<sup>14</sup> She had enough material resources to support the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah at her table. Moreover, the Naboth story indicates that her letters written in Ahab's name and the use of the king's seal were routine acts on her part, rather than an illegitimate usurpation of authority. There is no suggestion that these exercises of power were restricted just to the Naboth episode. Brenner thinks that Ahab allowed Jezebel to carry on in her religious and political role because it strengthened his own rule more effectively. The biblical narrators would have suppressed information of Jezebel as high priestess of Baal, since they did not acknowledge the validity of a female priesthood and the authority inherent in it.

Jezebel became the influential queen of the northern kingdom as the foreign wife of Ahab. She fostered the worship of Canaanite fertility deities, supporting four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of the goddess Asherah at her royal table (1 Kings 18:19). In the meantime, she ruthlessly persecuted the rival prophets of God, causing them to go into hiding (1 Kings 18:4). When Joram's general, Jehu, led a coup against Ahab, Jehu headed to the king's palace in Jezreel and assassinated him on the road, after which Jehu entered the city, where the queen mother was also staying. Jezebel saw what was happening, and after beautifying herself, called him a traitor. But Jehu was more than a mere traitor; he was the new anointed king. Because of her *harlotries and sorceries* (2 Kings 9:22) she met her ignominious death at the hands of Jehu. But her death was not

without dramatic flourish. Hearing the news of Jehu's massacre of the royal family, Jezebel *painted her eyes and adorned her hair*. Looking down at her adversary from her window, she ridiculed Jehu as an upstart claimant to the throne like his predecessor, Zimri. Her harem eunuchs, sensing changes in power in Jehu's favor, flung her down from the window at Jehu's command. Although Jehu ordered a burial for the *curse* woman, since *she is a king's daughter*, thus fulfilling Elijah's prophecy that *the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel* (2 Kings 9:30–37; cf. 1 Kings 21:23), all that remained of Jezebel's body was her skull, feet, and hands.

Jezebel is portrayed by the Rabbis as a wicked woman who represents the negative influence of Gentile women who turned Israel's heart to idolatry.<sup>15</sup> She would fatten the prophets of Baal and Asherah, thus angering God.<sup>16</sup> TB *Sanhedrin* 102b describes how Ahab was drawn after his wife and engaged in idolatrous worship. There was no plowed field in Israel on which Ahab did not plant an idol and worship it: "The altars of these are also like stone heaps upon a plowed field".

As Tribble notes,<sup>17</sup> Jezebel is contrasted with and juxtaposed to the prophet Elijah, to the extent that they both form the two panels of a mirrored diptych. She is a Baal supporter, he is a prophet of God; she is a woman, he is a man; she is a foreigner, he is a native; she has monarchic power, he has prophetic power; she threatens, he flees; finally, he wins, she is liquidated. The real conflict is not between Ahab (the king) and Elijah, but between Jezebel (the queen in actuality, if not in title) and Elijah. Ultimately the forces of God win; Jezebel loses.

Although the "looking through the window" motif has a stark male-female dichotomy, when used more broadly, even female characters make active use of windows resulting in a positive effect. Before crossing the Jordan River to attack the city of Jericho, Joshua sent two spies. The locals became aware of the spies, and they hid in the house of the prostitute Rahab, who was sympathetic to the Israelite cause and agreed to save them in exchange for a promise that she and her family would not be harmed in the subsequent assault. Fortunately, Rahab lived in a house attached to the city wall, and she had a window to the outside: *She let them down by a rope through the window, for her dwelling was within the city wall where she lived* (Josh. 2:15).

The word for "window" appears three times in the Rahab narrative<sup>18</sup> when she helped the men escape and marked her house so it would be spared destruction. Rahab used her window to the outside as a way of communicating with the Israelites outside the wall and saving herself and her family.

This narrative shows a very different use the biblical "looking through the window" motif. Rahab is a woman, and, as a rule, windows in the Bible paint the woman in a negative light, to emphasize the distance between what she sees and the reality of the man's world. Here, however, Rahab was not looking out a window, but actively lowering men out the window and communicated with them. Rahab's use of the window did not mark her as

aloof or passive; instead, she dominated the story entirely, and succeeded in fooling the king of Jericho and negotiated with the leader of the Israelite, all from her window.

Windows have a prominent role in Biblical narratives. Among the women, Michal (II Sam. 6:16), the mother of Sisera (Judges 5:28-31), and Jezebel (II Kings 9:30) were looking through their palace windows, separated from the scenes they witnessed or hoped to witness. The window motif accentuates the aloofness of these elite women, who were removed from the real world outside the window. In contrast, Rahab was an active and involved user of the window, which became a vehicle of her communication with and connection to the outside world.

The prophet Amos referred to the use of ivory to decorate palaces in ninth century Israel: *I will wreck the winter palace together with the summer palace; the ivory decorated homes<sup>19</sup> shall be demolished and the great houses shall be destroyed' declares the Lord...* (Amos 3:15), *They lie on ivory beds, lolling on their couches, feasting on lambs from the flock and on calves from the stalls* (Amos 6:4). While Amos is specifically pillorying wealthy people's use of luxury items while the poor remain downtrodden, his denouncing of what was occurring in Israel is suggestive of the ivory wall plaques found in the southern Levant during this period. The ones found in Samaria likely reflect local production.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, "looking through the window" is a recurrent motif in literature and art from antiquity to the present. On one hand, the window allows and sometimes invites the outsider or viewer to intrude into the private space of someone else and satisfy their curiosity or even prurient interest. On the other hand, it allows someone cloistered inside to look out to see the real world, to become enlightened. Both of these are at play in the narratives discussed above.

Although the "looking through the window" motif has a stark male-female dichotomy, when used more broadly, even both male and female characters such as Abimelech, Rahab, Sisera's mother, Michal, and Jezebel make active use of windows to positive effect. Regardless of gender, these biblical characters were "looking out the window", for better or for worse.

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## NOTES

1. See Ashkenasy, Nehama. *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape*. Wayne State University Press. October 1, 1998; Demsky, Aaron. “Looking Through the Window: A Gendered Motif.” *TheTorah.com*. 2017.

2. The first instance of this ruse was in the case of Avram and Sarai. As Abram approached the Egyptian border, he feared that Sarai’s great beauty might tempt someone to murder him and take her. In order to save his life, he asked his wife to pass herself off as his sister. His fears proved to be well founded. Sarai was spotted by Pharaoh’s officials, who carried her off to the royal palace. The text repeated strategy twice more: in 20:1–18 in relation to Abimelech king of Gerar and in 26:1, 6–11 and in connection with Isaac and Rebekah, discussed here.

3. Hebrew *metsahek* is a word play on the name Isaac (*yitshak*). Cf. 17:17; 18:12; 21:6, 9.

4. Cf. Judg 5:28; 2 Sam 6:16; 2 Kings 9:30.

5. See, similarly, the story of David seeing Bathsheba bathing on her roof: *Late one afternoon, David rose from his couch and strolled on the roof of the royal palace; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing* (2 Sam 11: 2).

6. Gunkel, Hermann. *Genesis*. Library of Biblical Studies. 1997.

7. If Isaac and Rebekah are staying in the king’s palace, then Abimelech is acting within his right of ownership but yet he violates his guests’ privacy.

8. Sisera’s mother did not know that her son had been killed.

9. Berlin, Adele. *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*. Eisenbrauns. 1994, p. 25.

10. *Ibid.* p. 25.

11. Hackett, Jo Ann. 1 And 2 Samuel. *Women’s Bible Commentary*. Edited by Carol A. Newsom et al. Westminster John Knox Press. 2012, p. 159.

12. Brenner, Athalya, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*. Sheffield. 1985.

13. Josephus. *Jewish Antiquities* 8.13.2.

14. Yee, Gale A. Jezebel. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. Ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 3. Doubleday. 1992, pp. 848–49.

15. Kadari, Tamar. Jezebel: *Midrash and Aggadah*. Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. 1999. Jewish Women's Archive.

16. *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:6:4.

17. Tribble, Phyllis. “The Odd Couple: Elijah and Jezebel.” *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*. edited by Christine Büchmann and Celina Spiegel, 166–179, 340–341. New York: 1994.

18. Josh 2: 15, 18, 21.

19. Perhaps this refers to local workshops producing these luxury items, see Demsky, Aaron. The Houses of Achzib. *Israel Exploration Journal* 16. 1966. Pp. 212-215.

20. Naeh, Liat. “In Search of Identity: The Contribution of Recent Finds to Our Understanding of Iron Age Ivory Objects in the material culture of the Southern Levant,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 42.1 (2015): 80-96.



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