



Jephthah's Daughter: Awake to Her Wicked Father (Judges 11:29–40)

PETER F. LOCKWOOD

ON READING JEPHTHAH'S VOW

As people have reflected on the vow of Jephthah that resulted in the sacrificial death of his daughter in Judges 11, their interpretation of the account and their evaluation of the two central characters have proceeded down two quite distinct paths.¹ The majority believe that the vow was rash. But despite Jephthah's horrifying filicide, they appear to be willing to cut him some slack. After all, he has just defeated Israel's archenemy, the Ammonites. He is filled with abject remorse when he sets eyes on his daughter coming out to greet him on his victorious return from battle, but he is left with no option but to follow through with the requirements of the vow. What's more, the Bible has included Jephthah among the mighty warriors whom Yahweh raises up in times of crisis to deliver Israel from the hand of the

¹ Sitting at the feet of Professor Emeritus Throntveit, my principal doctoral adviser, set me up for a teaching career that bore the marks of his influence from day one. I truly appreciate the friendship that arose between Mark and me during my years at LNTS, and the inspiration I gained from his classes and from the many hours he was willing to spend in mentoring me in preparation for teaching in Australia.

It is always a challenge to deal with some of the more difficult texts in the Bible, such as the text about Jephthah's vow to sacrifice his daughter. Absent a full narration of this decision, one might seek to remove some of the difficulties of this text, but in a close reading, Jephthah is exposed as cruel, and his daughter as the much nobler character.

enemy, and among the paragons of faith (cf. Judg 12:7; 1 Sam 12:11; Heb 11:32).² As for Jephthah's daughter, those who take this line—or variations on it—speak of her courage and stoicism in the face of her shocking fate, while puzzling about why she goes to her death so submissively and fails to take issue with her father by arguing that Yahweh abhors human sacrifice. A radically different path is taken by scholars who say that the account has been written from Jephthah's perspective from start to finish. It highlights his diplomatic skills and military prowess but makes light of the vow as if it were an unfortunate slip of the tongue. The account then glorifies the daughter for endorsing the Hebrew Bible's patriarchal ideology through her willing submission to her father, even to the extent of giving her life.³

The challenge of interpreting the account of Jephthah's vow is all the greater because the narrator does not explicitly evaluate the behavior of the two central characters. Nor are their internal thoughts given, which would provide a far more reliable guide to their motives than the words they speak. In fact, the words spoken by biblical characters may mislead and conceal as much as they guide and reveal. Even Yahweh fails to guide our reading by pronouncing judgment on Jephthah's vow or intervening before it is carried out.

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² For such favourable appraisals see Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*. The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009); Alice Logan, "Rehabilitating Jephthah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 665–85.

³ See in particular Cheryl J. Exum, "On Judges 11," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, The Feminist Companion to the Bible, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 131–44; Esther Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Feminist Companion to Judges*, 116–30; Danna Nolan Fewell, "Judges," in *The Westminster Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 70–72.

THE CONSUMMATE WRANGLER

A close reading of the episodes that precede the story of Jephthah's vow (Judg 11:1–28) leads to a clearer understanding of the messages that reverberate in the climactic meeting of father and daughter. Bearing deep-seated resentment against his people for disinheriting him and banishing him from home, Jephthah quickly gathers around him a band of "outlaws" (literally, "empty men") who have likewise outstayed their welcome in polite society. This indicates the company that Jephthah likes to keep. The ironic name of the region they inhabit, Tob (v. 3), Hebrew for "good," also gives advance notice that the vow story may well contain words whose meaning should not necessarily be taken at face value.

By leading his band of brigands on raiding parties into enemy territory, Jephthah initiates the first of a series of carefully planned events (vv. 3–11). The cross-border raids⁴ provoke the Ammonites into retaliation against Israel. Renowned for his military prowess and leadership skills, Jephthah knows it won't be long before he is summoned home to assume command of the forces of Gilead in the ensuing battle. And so it happens—to the chagrin of those who feel compelled to call on his services, the Gileadite elders, presumably mostly his half-brothers (v. 7). Filled with *Schadenfreude*, Jephthah knows he is well placed to drive a hard bargain. In addition to accepting the role of army commander, which would terminate once the enemy is routed, he compels the elders to swear a binding oath before Yahweh at Mizpah that he become permanent head of the Gileadites following the defeat of the Ammonites. Such an oath is an unpardonable offense against the commandment forbidding wrongful use of Yahweh's name (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). Jephthah's negotiating skills cannot be doubted, but they bring the man no credit. They are no more than the means he employs to put into effect an elaborate scheme designed to gain revenge on his half-brothers after he has assumed the role of supreme leader. That unfolding scheme reveals the depth of the grudge he is nursing.

The next steps in the plan follow in rapid succession. Jephthah initiates pre-battle negotiations with the Ammonite king (vv. 12–28), but then doesn't even deign to attend in person. Sending his underlings to the round of meetings (vv. 12 and 14) is a major diplomatic insult, designed to infuriate the enemy from the outset.⁵ Jephthah's men even convey their master's words as though they come from the very mouth of Yahweh—"Thus says Jephthah" (v. 15)—indicating the man's arrogant impiety. Then his representatives barely pause for breath as they assail the Ammonite king with a barrage of religious claims and historical assertions that are crafted to demonstrate Israel's prior claim to the contested land of Gilead (vv. 15–27).

For example, they contend that the Ammonites should content themselves with the territories that they have been assigned by the gods gathered in assembly

⁴ Cf. 2 Kgs 5:2 for another reference to cross-border raiding parties.

⁵ Seeking a cure for his leprosy, the mighty Syrian army commander Naaman storms off in a rage when Elisha likewise sends his servant to speak with him, rather than come out to speak with him in person (2 Kgs 5:9–12).

(Deut 32:8–9), in Ammon's case territory assigned by their god Chemosh (v. 24).⁶ Then, in rehearsing the story of Israel's occupation of the land east of the Jordan, Jephthah's people play fast and loose with the historical data as recorded in Deuteronomy 2 and Numbers 21–24. Most glaringly, they tell the Ammonite king to take a leaf out of Balak's book, when the ancient king of Moab supposedly allowed Israel to pass through his country in peace three hundred years earlier (v. 25), a radical departure from the picture that is painted in Numbers 22–24. Further, the Ammonites should know that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and they have long since failed to take possession of the land they were supposedly assigned (v. 26).

As a final slap in the enemy's face, Jephthah proposes that Yahweh serve as chief arbiter between the two nations with authority to determine which of them has a just claim to the disputed territory (v. 27). A true peace-seeking diplomat, however, would have proposed that both national gods serve in that role. And by insisting that the matter be settled by victory in battle, Jephthah shows that he has had warfare in mind from the outset. Far from suing for peace, his long-winded tirade is nothing but a declaration of war.⁷ With the insults and charges flowing thick and fast, the Ammonites have no option but to leave the negotiating table in a rage and make ready for battle (v. 28). That is the precise outcome that Jephthah, the consummate wrangler, has intended. He can now continue along the path that will lead to the coveted position of supreme head over Gilead, and with it the heaven-sent opportunity to avenge his long-held grievance against kith and kin.

THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN VOW

Before taking hold of his cherished prize in Gilead, Jephthah must straddle one last hurdle, the defeat of the Ammonites on the field of battle. Not convinced that victory is assured once the spirit of Yahweh has come upon him,⁸ he vows to offer to Yahweh in sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his house to greet him when he returns home in victory (vv. 30–31). Does it surprise Jephthah that his daughter is the one who does so (v. 34)? As a seasoned soldier, he knows the long-standing practice of women bursting forth in spontaneous celebration following triumph on the battlefield (Exod 15:20–21; Judg 5:28–30; 1 Sam 18:6–7). With no other children, Jephthah's daughter is by far the one most likely to come out to welcome him.

Events turn out precisely as Jephthah has hoped and planned. Far from shrinking in horror from the obligation to sacrifice his daughter, he is actually

⁶ According to Num 21:29, 1 Kgs 11:7, and 2 Kgs 23:13, the chief god of the Ammonites was Molech, otherwise known as Milcom. Chemosh was the god of the Moabites.

⁷ So argue Barry Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 46 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987); Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Jack Sasson, *Judges 1–12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Yale Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁸ In the book of Judges Yahweh's spirit is also said to rush upon Othniel (3:10), Gideon (6:34), and Samson (13:25; 15:14), ensuring victory in battle.

eager to do so. Together with Israel at large, he is steeped in the numerous syncretistic practices of the surrounding nations (Judg 10:6–16), including human sacrifice (Ps 106:34–39), which is believed to ensure victory in battle (cf. 2 Kgs 3:26–27). The sacrifice of his daughter is the bribe that Jephthah has offered and now owes to Yahweh—effectively the presiding judge in a courtroom trial—for granting him a favorable verdict, demonstrated by Jephthah’s victory.⁹ The vow is not rash but part of a high-risk, long-term plan.

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1. ²⁹The spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah; he crossed over to the Ammonites.
2. ³⁰Jephthah made a vow: “If you truly give the Ammonites into my hand,
3. ³¹whoever/whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I **return** peacefully (victoriously) against the Ammonites,
4. I will offer up as a burnt sacrifice.”
- 1' ^{32a}Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them
- 2' ^{32b–33}The Lord gave them into his hand,
- 3' ³⁴Jephthah **went into** his house at Mizpah, and there was his daughter coming out to meet him, with timbrels and with dancing.
- 4' She was his only daughter; he had no other son or daughter.¹⁰

The two panels of parallel text create the clear expectation that Jephthah will “return” to his home as he has promised (3 and 3'). But we read that he “enters” rather than “returns” to his house, before his daughter “comes out” to meet him, which is somewhat awkward if he is already indoors. However, the word has been chosen deliberately. The verb “to enter” (*bô'*) is frequently used in the Hebrew Bible for heterosexual coitus, so its use here already foreshadows the loaded sexual innuendo of Jephthah’s opening words when he and his daughter finally meet and speak (v. 35b).

⁹ Cf. Dennis Olson, “Judges,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 832.

¹⁰ The writer’s proposed structure and abbreviated translation of the opening verses of the account runs counter to section divisions in most English translations, which start the following section with verse 34.

The *chiasmus* of the opening exchange between Jephthah and his daughter, using my translation and structural proposal, serves to highlight the text's chief features.

^{35a} As soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes, and he said:

1. ^{35b} “Alas, my daughter, **you** have surely plunged me into misery, and **you** have become like those who trouble me.
2. ^{35c} As for me, **I have opened my mouth to the Lord,**
X. ^{35d} And I cannot **retract.**”
- 2' ^{36a} She said to him: “My father, **you have opened your mouth to the Lord,**
- 1' ^{36b} therefore (**you**) do to me according to what has gone out from **your** mouth, ^{36c} now that the Lord has given **you** vengeance against **your** enemies, the Ammonites.

The first thing to notice is that Jephthah's clothes-tearing stands outside the concentric text unit, reinforcing the conclusion that the gesture is a sham, especially since he does not display any of the other typical expressions of grief, such as covering himself in sackcloth and ashes, entering an extended period of mourning, and refusing to be comforted (Gen 37:34–35; 44:27–31). Secondly, his total refusal to turn back from, or repent of (*šûb*) the vow is highlighted by its pivotal position (X). Thirdly, Jephthah's daughter repeats the strange euphemism about opening the mouth to the Lord that Jephthah employs to describe the vow, rather than issuing a strident protest and delivering a convincing rebuttal (2 and 2'). Instead, fourthly, Jephthah's harsh and unjustified criticisms of his daughter are matched, remarkably, by her restraint and apparent commendation of her father, with the notable and unexpected addition of her comment about Jephthah's vengeance. The pronoun “you” predominates (1 and 1').

The reader is left aghast by Jephthah's words (v. 35b), a classic case of victim blaming and shaming. Jephthah claims that his daughter has plunged him into misery; or, literally, with a verb suggesting the shaming caused by sexual coercion, she has pulled him down on top of herself.¹¹ The picture is instantly created of a daughter who has become the long-term victim of a predatory father; this is not the first time that Jephthah has treated his daughter so abhorrently. As if the false charge of incestuous seduction isn't vicious enough, Jephthah follows it up by saying that she has become like those who “trouble” (*‘ākar*) him. As a noun, “trouble” means nationwide apostasy of such proportions that it incurs divine wrath and jeopardizes the covenant relationship with Yahweh.¹² Jephthah seems to be intent

¹¹ The verb is *kāra*ʿ, to bend, crouch, or kneel, but in the *hiphil* it literally means “to force to one's knees,” or metaphorically, “to plunge into misery.” Cf. Job 31:10, where the verb is applied to male-on-female sexual violence.

¹² Simeon and Levi (Gen 34:30), Achan (Josh 7:25), and Ahab (1 Kgs 18:18) are all said to “trouble” Israel by their misconduct. The alliteration of the three main verbs in verse 35—*qāra*ʿ (to tear), *kāra*ʿ (to drag down), and *‘ākar* (to trouble)—also suggests a close link between Jephthah's act of tearing his clothes and the

on steam-rolling his daughter into believing that his cause is just and on stifling her protests.¹³ Has he succeeded in crushing her spirit and bending her to his will, or has she carefully steeled herself for a time like this?

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER, GRACE UNDER FIRE

Faced with the threat of immediate death, Jephthah's daughter behaves in ways one would least expect. She might have raised her voice to heaven with ear-splitting screams of grief and anguish—but she doesn't. She might have spoken to her father about the precedents in Israel's history whereby vows have been broken with impunity—but she doesn't. She is fully aware that either approach would have provoked her father into taking her life without further ado. So instead she conducts herself in such a way as to achieve the twin goals on which she has set her heart: to give full rein to her grief surrounded by her female companions who will provide the love and comfort she craves, and to ensure that her story will be remembered and retold down through the ages.

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She achieves these goals by appealing to her father's narcissism, his longing to be the center of attention and to be honored and respected. Instead of drawing attention to her plight, as Jephthah might have expected, she pretends to make light of her dire situation by using the same euphemistic expressions for the vow that her father has used: "You have opened your mouth to the Lord" (v. 36). Intent on ensuring that her father will grant her request for a two-month reprieve, she also adds words that she suspects will clinch the deal: "The Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites" (v. 36). She knows precisely what motivates her father: revenge against his enemies. And she knows that the Ammonites aren't Jephthah's only enemies—not even his chief enemies—from whom he is seeking revenge. He has a much older score to settle. When Jephthah hears his daughter

two brutal accusations that he levels against his daughter, of seduction and sedition. Readers may all the more readily conclude that the act of tearing his clothes, his single expression of grief, is as duplicitous as his patently false charges.

¹³ One thinks of the practice of gaslighting, a form of psychological abuse whereby the perpetrator tries to gain total control by sowing seeds of doubt in their victim's mind about their sense of reality, even their sanity, by blaming, shaming, lying, withdrawing affection, or manipulating their environment. The term derives from the 1944 film *Gaslight* based on the 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton.

say that the Lord *has* given him vengeance over his enemies the Ammonites, he also hears her say that the Lord *will* give him victory over his real enemies, his half-brothers and the other Gileadite elders.¹⁴ Through all the events Jephthah has engineered throughout Judges 11, he has had his mind firmly fixed on his one and only goal: gaining vengeance against his half-brothers and others within Gilead who spurned him and ostracized him from home all those many years ago.

When Jephthah speaks of honoring the words that have “gone out” from his mouth, the reader knows that nothing good ever “goes out” from Jephthah’s mouth, whether the words are directed against the people of Gilead (vv. 7–11), against the king of Ammon (v. 27), against his daughter (vv. 35–36), or, in the following episode, against the men of Ephraim (12:1–6)—not to mention the carnage wrought by the raiding parties on which he once “went out” with his cronies (11:3). But by employing her father’s euphemism for the vow, “what has gone out from your mouth,” twice in rapid succession (v. 36), she also draws attention to the expression “the mouth of the sword”—in English, “the edge of the sword.” While lulling him into believing that she is happy to honor his pious vow, she is letting the reader know that she is fully aware that her father’s words are as biting and destructive as a fierce sword.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The story of Jephthah’s vow represents the extreme end of a behavioral spectrum that defines all people who have ever lived. He maxes out on the inherent human tendency to use power and influence to manipulate and control others, especially the vulnerable and marginalized, for self-serving ends. But once we have excoriated Jephthah for his abysmal behavior, it is not such a bad idea to hold the mirror up to our own face and ask to what extent Jephthah himself is beaming right back at us, and pray that the Spirit continue to transform us into people who reflect the courage, humility, and wisdom of his daughter. The gospel frees us to make such connections, to great benefit.

The Bible’s ability to tell it how it is never ceases to amaze, and so it is with this story. Jephthah’s callous words in immediate response to the sight of his daughter coming out to meet him indicate that they arise from a dark heart. They are not the words of a man shocked and guilt-ridden. If Jephthah were genuinely repelled by the thought of offering his daughter in sacrifice, the skilled negotiator could have reneged on his vow readily enough.¹⁵ If he were genuinely distraught, he would have displayed the full range of emotions and exhibited the behaviors that belong to Israel’s rituals of mourning, not simply act out a single gesture of

¹⁴ The perfect aspect in Hebrew often does double duty as a prophetic perfect, which allows the verb to be translated in the future tense.

¹⁵ For the prohibition of human sacrifice, cf. Lev 18:21; 20:2–5; Deut 12:31; 18:10; 2 Kgs 16:3; 23:10; Jer 7:31; 32:35; Mic 6:7, and for the prohibition of breaking vows, cf. Num 30:1–2; Eccl 5:4–5.

grief. It's clearly a charade.¹⁶ Jephthah lacks any of the redeeming features that have been said to soften his image and make him a more complex and rounded character. Quite simply, he is a megalomaniac who is preoccupied with gaining absolute power over others and revenge against his enemies. A thoroughgoing narcissist, he employs devious cunning, rhetorical bombast, and the cloak of religion to achieve his self-centered goals.

The daughter's response to her father consists of a heady mixture of reserve, circumlocution, flattery, and a deft exploitation of his lifelong obsession with revenge. Also, she increases the chances of a stay of execution by saying that the purpose of her vigil on the mountains is to "bemoan her virginity," thereby garnering the sympathy of a man who delights in making the grandiose gesture (vv. 37–38). Despite the false charges that have been leveled against her, and despite the horrifying prospect of dying at her father's hand, she takes him completely off guard by her quiet restraint and her feigned interest in the glorious vengeance he is about to achieve. Surprised and flattered, Jephthah gives immediate assent to her request for time and space to grieve her impending death in the company of her friends (v. 38). It is hard to agree that Jephthah's daughter is portrayed as submissive, compliant, and crushed in spirit by her overbearing father. Far rather, by holding her nerve against impossible odds, she gains for herself and successive generations all that is humanly possible within her straitened circumstances.

Unlike her father's fake grief, her grief is real and gut-wrenching, and her period of mourning goes on for two months. Unlike the attempts in the wider biblical corpus and beyond to put a positive spin on Jephthah's rule, his daughter's quiet words with their subversive content have led to the creation of a story that exposes him for the man he truly is. Her story will be retold year after year in an annual four-day festival named for her.¹⁷ That story will remind readers of the violence and abuse that some people—even the most overtly pious—are capable of unleashing against vulnerable members of the family and the community. And it will show forth a life of grace under fire. ⊕

Following ten years of parish ministry in the Lutheran Church of Australia, REV. DR. PETER F. LOCKWOOD completed a ThD at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1991. He taught in the Old Testament department at Australian Lutheran College in Adelaide, South Australia, from 1992 until his retirement in 2016. His published writings have focused on Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, and Job.

¹⁶ It has been proposed (Danna Nolan Fewell) that Jephthah may have shared the vow with his daughter in advance so she wouldn't be the first to come out to greet him. She still decides to do so and thereby gives her life for an unsuspecting animal or house-guard. It seems more likely, however, that she is portrayed as not knowing about the vow, but quickly works out how to turn its fulfillment to her advantage and the advantage of future generations.

¹⁷ Jesus's promise that the story of his anointing by a likewise anonymous woman will be told throughout the world "in memory of her" (Mark 14:9 NIV) contains echoes of the annual remembrance of Jephthah's daughter.