

a
Feminist Companion
to
Judges

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ABBREVIATIONS

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| AAR | <i>American Academy of Religion</i> |
| BDB | F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> |
| CBQ | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> |
| CIQ | <i>Classical Quarterly</i> |
| ExpTim | <i>Expository Times</i> |
| HUCA | <i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> |
| ICC | <i>International Critical Commentary</i> |
| Int | <i>Interpretation</i> |
| JAAR | <i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i> |
| JBL | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> |
| JSOTSup | <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</i> |
| JTS | <i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> |
| LCL | Loeb Classical Library |
| NJV | New Jewish Version |
| OTL | Old Testament Library |
| Sem | <i>Semiotica</i> |
| TDOT | G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> |
| UT | C.H. Gordon, <i>Ugaritic Textbook</i> |
| VT | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i> |
| ZAW | <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |

MARGINALIZATION, AMBIGUITY, SILENCING
THE STORY OF JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER*

Esther Fuchs

The brief narrative on Jephthah's daughter in Judg. 11.34-40 has usually been understood as a tragic story about the fatal results of a rash vow. Jephthah vows to sacrifice to Yahweh whoever comes out of his house upon his victorious return from his war with the Ammonites (Judg. 11.30-31). To his terror and dismay, it is his daughter who comes out to greet him 'with timbrels and dances' (v. 34). For generations the question of what really happened to Jephthah's daughter preoccupied Bible scholars. The 'sacrificialists' have argued that Jephthah kept his vow, literally, while the 'non-sacrificialists' have argued that Jephthah let his daughter survive.¹ In what follows, I will argue that the ambiguity that characterizes the description of the sacrifice is typical of the entire story. The story both expresses and suppresses, presents and erases the daughter. The ambiguity functions, I suggest, as a kind of apology, a subtle justification of Jephthah's behavior. By suppressing details about the sacrifice, the narrator makes it possible for us to deny that the sacrifice has ever taken place. Though the tragedy is ultimately the daughter's, it is Jephthah who is presented as the tragic victim of circumstances. The daughter is sacrificed in more than one sense in our story, for the center of attention continues to be Jephthah.

* This article is based on my paper, 'Biblical Daughters and the Biblical Narrative', delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Chicago, December 1984.

1. For a survey of the debate, see D. Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1986).

In a pioneering feminist reading of the story of Jephthah and his daughter, Phyllis Trible shifts the focus of the scholarly debate to the characterization and the fate of the nameless daughter.¹ Pointing up the contrast between the faithful daughter—faithful both to her father and to Yahweh—and the rash, faithless father, Trible's reading condemns the father for his foolish vow. In this reading, Jephthah's nameless daughter is yet another one of the forgotten women of the Bible, who have been abused and consigned to oblivion. Trible emphasizes the injustice committed against the daughter, and the latter's innocence: 'Hers [the daughter's] is premediated death, a sentence of murder passed upon an innocent victim because of the faithless vow uttered by her foolish father'. Movingly and forcefully, Trible describes the tragic dimensions of the story:

A vow led to victory; victory produced a victim, the victim died by violence; violence has, in turn, fulfilled the vow. From beginning to end, this faithless and foolish vow has been the subject. It controls both father and daughter, though in different ways.²

Trible's reading refocuses traditional discussions of the story in such a way that the daughter, rather than the father, becomes the center of our preoccupation. More importantly, she makes it clear that it is no longer possible for us to ignore or neglect Jephthah's nameless daughter. The courageous and noble daughter must be mourned for, remembered and respected by women today, much as ancient Israelite women are reported to have done (Judg. 11.39-40).

In what follows I would like to call attention to the means by which the innocent daughter is marginalized and silenced, and how the father, despite his 'foolish vows', emerges as a sympathetic tragic character. Rather than taking the story as a reflection of historical reality, I would like to consider it as an ideological construction. I would like to suggest that the construction of point of view, word selection, omissions and certain repetitions, and above all the narrative's much-discussed ambiguity understate the father's culpability at the expense of his

1. See P. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, pp. 93-116.

2. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, pp. 104, 106.

daughter. If the stuttering description of the daughter is a manifestation of the Bible's sexual politics, if the ambiguity puts a better light on Jephthah, then critique and resistance rather than mourning should inform a feminist reading of the biblical narrative.¹

The narrative about Jephthah's sacrifice of his one and only daughter spans six compact verses (Judg. 11.34-40) that are embedded in the larger context of Jephthah's narrative (Judg. 11.1-12.7). It is constructed as a sad interlude that disrupts the flow of two success stories: Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites (Judg. 11.12-33) and his successful conquest in his battle with the Ephraimites (Judg. 12.1-6).² Thematically, a woman seems to be involved in each calamitous phase of Jephthah's career. The son of a harlot, he is expelled from home by his 'legitimate' brothers (Judg. 11.1-5); the father of a daughter, he is 'brought down to his knees' (Judg. 11.35) by her. Read diachronically, Jephthah's encounter with his daughter creates an affective 'slope', as it follows the description of Jephthah's ascent to power and as it precedes the story of his success over the Ephraimites.

Jephthah's daughter first appears in Judg. 11.34, without introduction. We are not told who her mother was; we do not know her name: 'And Jephthah came to Mizpah, to his home, and suddenly [*hinneh*] his daughter is coming out towards him with timbrels and dances and she is the only one; beside her he

1. On the concept of sexual politics in the Hebrew Bible, see my article 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible', in A. Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 117-36. See also my forthcoming book, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*.

2. Although the story of Jephthah *per se* begins in Judg. 11.1, with the introduction of his familial roots and his early biography, one should consider Judg. 10.6-18 as a general introduction to Jephthah's story, as it describes the political chaos and oppression of the Israelites by their enemies—notably the Ammonites—a situation which explains and catalyzes Jephthah's ascent to the position of judge. On the problems of narrative delimitation in the Hebrew Bible, see M. Perry and M. Sternberg, 'Caution: A Literary Text! Problems in the Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative' (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 2 (1970), pp. 608-63.

does not have a son or a daughter'.¹ That the daughter is Jephthah's only child tells us more about her importance for *him* than about her. A minor character, her significance to the story derives from her relationship with her father.

The existence of Jephthah's daughter as a literary character is predicated on the intersection of her actions with the major plot line of the narrative which consists of her father's actions. What brings Jephthah's daughter into existence is an accident: her unpredictable (from Jephthah's and the reader's point of view) emergence from her father's house. Verse 34 establishes the fundamental rules that will undergird the daughter's presentation henceforth: she is nameless, she is identified and defined by her filial relationship with Jephthah and it is this relationship that underlies her characterization and determines her significance in the story.

The narrator repeats that the daughter is Jephthah's 'only one' (*y'hidâ*), repeating for emphasis and clarification that 'beside her he [Jephthah] does not have a son or a daughter'. This presentation does less to characterize the daughter than to clarify what the daughter represents for the father, and what, consequently, her loss will mean to him. It is also inserted as an explanation for Jephthah's desperate outcry and mourning gesture which follow in v. 35. The daughter is described from Jephthah's point of view. *W'hinnêh*, which is usually rendered as 'behold', switches the narrative point of view from that of the omniscient authoritative narrator to the subjective point of view of Jephthah.²

The switch effectuated by *W'hinnêh* reflects the twist of events,

1. This and the following quotations are based on my own translations and the RSV.

2. On the use of *hinneh* as a transformer from objective omniscient narration to a character's subjective point of view, see S. Bar-Efrat, *The Art of the Biblical Story* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1979), pp. 61-64. Although there is no explicit factive verb to denote that the narrator uses Jephthah's point of view to describe the events 'as they are', the use of *w'hinnêh* implies here a 'perspectival subordination', namely an agreement between the character's and the narrator's point of view. See M. Sternberg, 'The Truth Versus All the Truth: The Rendering of Inner Life in Biblical Narrative' (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 29 (1979), pp. 110-46.

the sudden and unexpected switch from Jephthah's public victory to his personal defeat. The omission of the transformation 'and he saw', intensifies the abrupt transition in Jephthah's consciousness and the horrifying surprise he is experiencing. The only one who is unaware of the ironic incongruity between appearance and 'reality' is the daughter. Greeting her father with timbrels and dance the daughter is presented as a victim of dramatic irony; she does not know the gruesome meaning of her joyful actions. The incompatibility of her joy and Jephthah's grief further intensifies the incongruity between her limited knowledge and reality.

It is not only Jephthah, but the narrator and the reader as well who become aware of the perfect congruity between the daughter's actions and Jephthah's wording of his vow. The daughter's coming out to greet her father echoes the words Jephthah uses in his vow, but it is not made clear whether she knows anything at all about his vow. Jephthah vowed that 'the one who will come out to meet me' (*hagygōšē* 'šer *yēšē*, lit. 'the corner forth who will come forth to meet me') will be sacrificed. The verse describing his daughter's actions echoes these words by ascribing *yōšē* *l* *liqrā* 'tō (lit. 'coming forth towards him') to his daughter. The root *yš* appears for the fourth time in the chapter in the daughter's submissive response to her father: 'do to me according to what came out [*yš*] of your mouth' (v. 36).¹ While the first two uses of the root are hypothetical, presenting the act of 'coming out' as a possibility, the third use is predicative, it presents the verb as an actuality. Yet, even as the daughter is said to come out, it is still unclear whether the daughter's coming out of her house to greet her father will in fact seal her fate as the burnt offering her father vowed to offer Yahweh. It is only the fourth use of the root, this time applied not to 'whatever comes out of Jephthah's house, but to

'whatever came out of Jephthah's mouth' that clinches the fate of Jephthah's daughter. It is the father's word that determines the daughter's verdict. Furthermore, it is the daughter's consent to accept 'whatever came out' of her father's mouth that dooms her.

The daughter's actions are not only syntactically framed within the father's point of view, psychologically and experientially too, they echo what she assumes to be her father's expectation. Her joyous greeting follows her father's victory just as later on her mourning will follow both temporally and etologically her father's grievous outburst. Thus the verse introducing the daughter depicts her most important characteristic—her complete obedience to her father, a most welcome characteristic from a patriarchal point of view.

At the same time, however, the verse is careful to point out that the daughter's fateful action—although a result of the father's victory—is not a direct performance of his will. The daughter dooms herself—unknowingly. She is responsible for her death just as much as her father is, if not more, for after all Jephthah is not shown to instruct her to come out of the house to greet him. To the extent that the daughter's greetings are the effect of her independent initiative she too is responsible for her own death. Later in the chapter the daughter will be shown to have a measure of independence and a will of her own as she asks for two months in which to mourn her virginity with her female friends (v. 37), a request the father is shown to grant. To some extent, the daughter actively participates in the process leading to her own demise. Her death is the product of a collaborative effort on the part of herself and her father. This point is important. For although the narrative seeks to demonstrate the fatal mistake of Jephthah as judge and leader and his tragedy as father, it stops short of depicting him as a brutal sacrificer of his daughter. From this point of view, our narrative agrees with the compositional principles of all father-daughter narratives in the Hebrew Bible: a father is *never* shown to be the direct perpetrator of his daughter's demise. Rather he is shown as a helpless victim of unforeseen circumstances, caught in the web of conflicting allegiances, and insurmountable constraints. By portraying the daughter as coming out to meet her father of her

1. A 'leitwort', or a leading word, is a verbal form—an actual word, an idiomatic expression, a root or a sound pattern—which appears with some frequency in a certain context, thus calling attention to its semantic meaning and emphasizing the concept or idea it signifies. The verbal form does not have to recur in identical form; often it is the variations on the form which most effectively generate meaning. See M. Buber, *The Way of the Bible* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, n.p., 1964), pp. 284-309.

own accord, the verse introducing the daughter establishes that she too is responsible—however innocently and tragically—for her end.

Having introduced the daughter from the father's point of view, her actions forming an object clause of what her father perceives, the narrative goes on to unfold the events from the father's point of view: 'And then when he saw her, he tore his clothes and said: "Aha! my daughter, you have brought me down to my knees [*kr*] and you have become my troubler [*kr*], and I have opened my mouth to Yahweh and I cannot go back"' (v. 35). The quick succession of the verbs 'saw' (*r'h*), 'tore' (*qr*) and 'said' (*mr*) conveys the spontaneity of Jephthah's reaction to the unexpected appearance of his daughter and his shock at seeing her. While the rending of his clothes indicates his grief and mourning, his words indicate both by their content and their structure the despair he experiences. The expletive 'ahah' which opens Jephthah's exclamation is a howl of grief that precedes the cause for this howl—'my daughter' (*bitt*).

Apparently, 'you have brought me to my knees' (*kr*) and 'you have been among my enemies' (*kr*) is a selfish accusation. Instead of considering his daughter's fate, Jephthah accuses her of collaborating with his enemies ('*kr* is usually associated with military enemies). On another level, however, this exclamation is a pointed expression of grief and helplessness. Verse 34 emphatically reiterates the fact that Jephthah's daughter is his only child in order to explain what motivates Jephthah's emotional outburst. After all, Jephthah is described as 'a mighty man of valor' (Judg. 11.1), a tough outcast and a courageous warrior who is not likely to break down easily. Jephthah endears himself to the reader in admitting that it is he who has 'opened his mouth to Yahweh'—the use of the pronoun '*anōki* (I myself) stresses his own culpability—and he also admits that because he has 'opened his mouth to Yahweh' he cannot 'go back', namely, revoke his vow. Had Jephthah rebuked his daughter for coming out of the house without consulting him, it would have been easier to construe his outburst as an unfeeling accusation. But instead, what the exclamation dramatizes is Jephthah's bitterness, despair and anger. The words 'you have brought me down to my knees' and 'you have become my troubler' are words

befitting a description of military or political defeat. The words the narrator puts in Jephthah's mouth thus continue the chilling contrast between the military victory Jephthah has just reaped and his private tragedy, between his expectation of being raised and elevated through his victory, and his unexpected demotion; it plays up the reversal of circumstance which turned his daughter into one of his enemies. The repeated root *kr* in the form of an infinitive absolute, and the fourfold repetition of the consonants *kr* and *qr*, intensify phonetically the semantic meaning of 'tear', 'bring low' and 'troubler', the words in which they occur.

What adds to the expressive force of Jephthah's exclamation is its incoherence and syntactic disruption. Rather than increasing the cohesion of the four clauses making up Jephthah's sentence, the copulative *waw*, which repeats three times, underscores the flawed logical and causal sequence of Jephthah's words. In essence the nominal 'and you have become my troubler' (lit. 'you are among my troublers') adds little—from an informational point of view—to the verbal clause with which it is conjoined by *waw*. It is possible, however, to argue that being considered an enemy is an irreversible state, whereas bringing one down to one's knees is a reversible action. The third and fourth verbal clauses further emphasize that what has been done is irreversible. The perfect tense of *pāšif* ('I opened up my mouth') is semantically reinforced by the assertion that what came out of Jephthah's mouth is irrevocable: 'I cannot go back'. While the relationship between the final two clauses is complementary more than synonymous, it still fails to explain what it is that came out of Jephthah's mouth and why it is irrevocable, just as the previous two clauses fail to explain why the daughter has become her father's troubler and why he thinks she has undermined him. The basic message of this combined sentence is that the daughter has inflicted on her father a dreadful disaster which cannot be undone, but despite the sentence's verbosity it fails to communicate why this is so. Yet, the description of Jephthah's vow makes it possible for the reader to understand the father. But what does the daughter know?

At this point, the text does not explain what the daughter knows. The reader is left to surmise that Jephthah tells his

daughter about his vow, but the narrator refrains from being explicit. The text is ambiguous both about how much the daughter knows and about the precise consequence of the vow, namely whether or how she was sacrificed. One possible explanation is that the narrator avoids explicitness and repetition that might indict the male protagonist and generate too much sympathy for the female character. The absence of a clear reference to the daughter's prospective sacrifice or, retroactively to Jephthah's vow, cannot be explained merely by the fact that the text has already referred to it previously (vv. 30-31). Repetition is a hallmark of biblical prose, just as much as informational omissions are; it is valid to question both phenomena whenever they occur.¹

Although the daughter is portrayed as unaware of the implications of her own actions and of her father's vows, the text refrains from unduly emphasizing the fact that her father is directly responsible for her demise. Rather, it expresses the sense that the daughter has become the cause for her father's demise. Jephthah's outcry does not necessarily reflect the authorial point of view, but it is nevertheless the only explicit evaluation of the daughter's actions, the expressive effectiveness of which was made clear above. There is no alternative judgment of the situation, either from the daughter's point of view, from the narrator's point of view, or from Yahweh's point of view. Rather than exposing Jephthah as a selfish coward, the text depicts him as a victim; a victim through his own wrong-headed actions, but a victim nonetheless. The text is not bringing out Jephthah's unfair and immoral treatment of his daughter, but his confounded reaction to a devastating turn of events, one that he clearly has not anticipated.

An explicit reference to the vow at this point might also render less credible the daughter's calm and collected response which immediately follows her father's outcry: 'And she said to him, "My father, you opened your mouth (*pāšitā*) to Yahweh, do to me according to what came out of your mouth, as Yahweh has done for your revenge upon your enemies, upon the Ammonites"'

1. On the strategy of repetition and its function in the biblical narrative, see M. Sternberg, 'The Structure of Repetition in the Biblical Story' (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 25 (1977), pp. 109-50.

(v. 36). This is the first time the daughter is shown to open her mouth. Just as her deeds in v. 34 are an extension and a reflection of her father's actions—she is rejoicing in his military victory—so her words here present her as an extension and reflection of her father's words. Not only does her speech denote acceptance and submission, it also echoes the very words used by her father. Instead of asking for clarification, instead of questioning the value and validity of her father's words, she echoes her father's 'I opened up [*pāšitā*] my mouth to Yahweh' with 'you opened [*pāšitā*] your mouth to Yahweh'.

The daughter is not shown to question her father. She retains the ambivalence and obliqueness used by Jephthah as she suggests 'do to me' rather than specifically referred to the actual deed in question. Furthermore, the daughter justifies her submission by reminding her father that fulfilling his vow to Yahweh is a just and venerable deed as Yahweh has defeated the Ammonites, Jephthah's enemies. The daughter describes Yahweh's defeat of the Ammonites as a service rendered to Jephthah personally. Rather than say 'as Yahweh has avenged the Ammonites on our behalf', or 'on the behalf of Israel', she uses the second person singular personal pronoun 'you' and possessive pronoun 'your', saying: 'as Yahweh has done revenge for you upon your enemies, the Ammonites'. The parallel between 'do to me' ('*šēh*') framing the father-daughter relationship and 'did to you' ('*āšā*') ascribed to Jephthah's relationship with God, alludes to the idea that the daughter owes as much obedience to her father, as her father does to Yahweh.

This parallel reflects the hierarchical structure placing father above daughter, and Yahweh above the human father. The verb 'to do' recurs for the third time in v. 37, and here too it is presented as part of the daughter's speech. Only in its fourth appearance is this verb ascribed to the father: 'and her father did [*āšā*] to her his vow which he vowed' (v. 39). The repetition of the verb 'to do' is not only an oblique substitute for that which the narrative tries not to express explicitly, it also conveys the cooperation of the daughter with her father's scheme. Jephthah's final 'deed' (sacrifice) of his daughter would not have been possible without the consent of his daughter, implied by the repetition of the weighty yet vague verb '*āšā*'. The daughter's speech

mirrors her father's speech, by creating a chiasmic structure paralleling in reverse order the verbal expressions and fundamental ideas contained in the father's speech. Whereas the father's speech begins with the idea that his daughter has defeated him and turned into one of his enemies, the daughter's response ends with the reminder that Jephthah has defeated—through Yahweh's help—his real troublemakers, his enemies the Ammonites. And whereas Jephthah's speech ends with the fatal opening of his mouth to Yahweh, the daughter's speech begins with this idea, using the very same idiom (opening one's mouth to Yahweh).

Although the daughter might know that her life is at stake, she appears not only to be willing to obey her father, but also to justify him. The narrator could not be more effective in constructing the perfect filial role model. Jephthah's daughter is the supreme image of the perfect daughter, whose loyalty and submissiveness to her father knows no limits. She understands his predicament and the irrevocability of a vow once uttered to Yahweh. The text does not present her as the tragic obedient servant of Yahweh, but as the obedient daughter of her father. Jephthah does not hesitate to fulfil his vow to Yahweh, just as his daughter does not hesitate to obey him. Had she challenged her father, 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. A protest or a howl of despair on the part of Jephthah's daughter would have unduly highlighted the daughter's tragedy. The daughter's calm response and subsequent silence permit the reader to remain focused on the father's grief. Had Jephthah's daughter been shown to ask for pity, had she asked to be spared, had she turned to Yahweh with a plea for mercy, the narrative would have tipped the scales too much in her favor, so much so that Jephthah's refusal to grant her freedom would have cast both him and Yahweh in a questionable role. The daughter's outcry or protest would have necessitated the father's recourse to force. This scenario, however, would have cast Jephthah in the role of a heartless villain and elicited too much sympathy for the daughter.

Instead of a desperate plea, a protest, or a howl of despair comparable in its effect to that of Jephthah's verbal expression of dismay and helplessness, the narrative shows the daughter to

ask for a two-month respite in which to mourn for her 'virginity': 'And she said to her father, "Let this be done to me, let me alone two months, that I may depart and go down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my female friends"' (v. 37). Whereas Jephthah's expression of grief is spontaneous and emotional, his daughter's request is just as calm as her response, and the arrangement for which she is asking has a formulaic and ritualized quality. Whereas in Jephthah's case, the text dramatizes the gestures and the words of the grief-stricken father, in the daughter's case it contents itself with a summary description: 'and she departed, she and her female friends, and lamented her virginity upon the mountains' (v. 38). How Jephthah's daughter mourns and laments is not specified. Again, greater specificity at this point might have generated too much sympathy for the daughter.

There is something highly formulaic about the request, and by granting it, Jephthah shows himself to be more compassionate than he might have otherwise appeared. Indeed the daughter's request is presented as the source of an annual Israelite custom according to which: 'the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days a year' (v. 40). The request and its granting demonstrate some form of redress, a measure of grace and an emotional outlet for the reader to exorcise her own horror at the unfolding narrative. It gives Jephthah a chance to demonstrate magnanimity and reinforces the impression that the father is the victim rather than initiator of the unfortunate circumstance. Thirdly, it underscores the fact that the daughter has freely collaborated with her father in that by the end of two months she 'returned to her father and he did to her his vow that he had vowed' (v. 39). The daughter is shown to have returned out of her own free will; she was not forced to the altar, but rather cooperated with her father in what the narrative presents as an unavoidable and irrevocable act.

Jephthah's willingness to let his daughter roam the mountains to mourn her virginity also tells us more about him than about her. That he allowed her a period of grace before her death demonstrates that he did not wish to harm her, that he did love her, and that there was nothing at all he could do to revoke his

vow. The fact that the daughter goes off to the mountains with her female friends does not help us understand her as much as it helps us appreciate the tragedy of the father.

If in the first part of the narrative the daughter acts as an extension of her father, accepting his judgment and justifying it, in the second part her words and actions seem to be subjected to the etiological interest of the narrator. This is dramatized by the daughter's only two speech acts, which are framed by Jephthah's speech acts.¹

The narrator uses the daughter's first speech act as an endorsement of the father's point of view (v. 36), while using the second speech act as the primary explanation of a custom (v. 37). The first speech act denotes a daughter's submission to her father in a particular personal context; the second speech act extends the meaning of the personal act into the public and national sphere. Both speech acts present the daughter as the passive object of another's actions. In v. 36, the predicate of the main clause is 'do to me'. In the following verse, the main clause uses the same idiomatic expression, this time in the passive form: 'let this be done to me'. Both speech acts are in the desiderative mode. The daughter thus appears to *choose* to obey her father. She *chooses* to be the culprit.

Then what *do* we know about this nameless daughter? We know that she is Jephthah's only daughter and that she is a virgin. Her virginity is mentioned three times in the course of the narrative. The first time it is implied by the daughter's own words: 'that I may depart and bewail my virginity' (v. 37). The second time it is implied by the narrator's third person report: 'and [she] bewailed her virginity upon the mountains' (v. 38). The third time the narrator confirms explicitly her intact sexuality: 'and she had not known a man' (v. 39). It is possible to understand the repeated emphasis on the daughter's virginity as a valorizing statement. Like beauty, virginity in women seems to be a mark of high distinction.² The emphasis on the daughter's

virginity implies that she has not yet produced children (the loss to Jephthah's genealogy). Like the note on her being an only child, the emphasis on her virginity indicates what her loss means to Jephthah. It tells us little about her.

A similar technique of selective disclosure is at work in the narrator's report about what was supposed to actually 'be done' to the daughter. 'And then [*way'hî*] at the end of two months she returned to her father and he did to her the vow that he had vowed and she had not known a man and it became a custom in Israel' (v. 39). But what precisely is it that Jephthah 'did' to his daughter?

The repeated use of *way'hî* can be taken as a possible clue. It introduces the father's return from war, and the daughter's return home. But while the first *way'hî* introduces specific actions expressive of intense emotion, the second *way'hî* suppresses rather than expresses; both details and emotions are hidden rather than disclosed. The first *way'hî* in v. 35 introduces Jephthah's intense confusion and despair, whereas the second *way'hî* introduces a series of verbs with no emotive value. Jephthah's daughter is said to 'return' to her father and because the father cannot 'return' to her father and because daughter must 'return' to him. But the juxtaposition of the verbs also highlights the contrast in the emotional charge attached to them. The father's inability to 'return' constitutes the emotional and dramatic climax of the scene, the daughter's return to her father—although much more horrifying in its implications—is presented objectively and dispassionately. The text does not disclose her feelings upon her return nor her father's feelings as he 'did' to her according to his vow. Instead of explaining what it is that Jephthah did to his daughter, the text repeats once again what we already know about her: 'and she did not know a man' (v. 39). The dry report on the custom purportedly inspired by Jephthah's daughter also fails to give us the information we need. That it became a custom for Israelite women to mourn (*tnh*) 'four days a year' (v. 40) shifts our focus from the daughter to the annual custom.

The narrative's focus on the father's point of view, and the various elisions in the description of the daughter's inner life, suggest an attempt to mitigate the horror of Jephthah's behavior.

1. On speech acts in the biblical narrative, see G. Sheintuch and U. Mali, 'Towards an Illocutionary Analysis of Dialogue in the Bible' (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 29 (1979), pp. 110-46.

2. Examples are Rebekah (Gen. 24.16), Tamar (2 Sam. 13) and Esther (2.17).

The much-debated question of whether or not Jephthah's daughter was indeed sacrificed is part of a general strategy to defend the father at the daughter's expense.

Though Phyllis Trible is right in wrestling Jephthah's daughter from the marginal role assigned to her by traditional Bible exegetes and scholars, it is worthwhile to examine the original text for the ways in which it focuses attention on the father. We have seen that the narrative follows Jephthah's point of view, both perceptually and emotionally. By using ambiguity at key points, the text furthermore leaves to conjecture actions whose detailed description might have condemned the father. By dramatizing Jephthah's anguish and by describing to us his readiness to respond positively to his daughter's request, and by using ambiguity and oblique references to the actual sacrifice, the narrator interprets the events he is reporting as the father's tragedy. By tagging on a postscript about the annual mourning of Jephthah's daughter, the narrator would counterbalance the daughter's horrid end. Literary strategies work here in the interests of patriarchal ideology, the ideology of male supremacy. This understanding calls for a resistant reading of the biblical text, a reading attuned to the political implications of omissions, elisions and ambiguity. A reader, above all, that resists the tendency in biblical narrative to focus on the father at the daughter's expense.

ON JUDGES 11

J. Cheryl Exum

1. The Awful and Sustaining Power of Words

A particular power resides in words of blessing and curse, oaths and vows.¹ 'I have blessed him—yes, and he shall be blessed' (Gen. 27.33). Isaac cannot alter his blessing of Jacob, even though he has been tricked into giving it. 'I have opened my mouth to YHWH, and I cannot take it back' (Judg. 11.35). The vow is irrevocable, irreversible and unalterable.² Thus Jephthah, who has elsewhere shown a propensity for negotiation, though not with particularly impressive results, does not make any attempt to modify its terms, by which he is bound to sacrifice to God his only child. Nor does his daughter challenge the inviolability of the vow, but asks only for a two months' reprieve, after which the vow is carried out. The word kills.

A father's sacrifice of his only child in fulfillment of an

1. As A.C. Thiselton ('The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings', *JTS* 25 [1974], pp. 293-96) shows, the power of such utterances is not magical but rather lies in their nature as what J.L. Austin called performative utterances. The blessing, for example, has power in so far as it constitutes the act of blessing. Such utterances also have power in that they usually invoke the deity. My approach to words here is inspired by G. Hartman's chapter 'Words and Wounds' in *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

2. The present story clearly assumes this, whereas Lev. 27.1-8 stipulates monetary payment by which a person vowed to God could be released. In the midrashic literature, one finds various attempts to explain Jephthah's ignorance of the law; see D. Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech Press, 1986).