

SEE ALSO Part II: Prostitute, Mother of Jephthah (Judg 11:1–2).

JUDG 11:34–40

Daughter of Jephthah

The story of this unnamed woman appears near the end of her father's story (see Judg 11:1–12:7). Its position, as well as the events that it narrates, suggests that it functions primarily, though not necessarily solely, as a further explication of the character of her father. It is, further, one of the most enigmatic stories in the Hebrew Bible.

The woman's father, Jephthah, has a rather unconventional background. His mother is a prostitute; his father is identified as Gilead. But since Gilead also names the region in Transjordan from which Jephthah comes, the text may be implying that any of the men of Gilead could be Jephthah's father. This questionable parentage leads to Jephthah's being driven away from his home by his kinsmen. He becomes an outlaw and presumably builds up a reputation as a fighter. When his people are threatened militarily by the Ammonites, they appeal to Jephthah to be their commander. Jephthah agrees, being enticed by the promise that he will become their overall leader if he is victorious. But before going into battle, he seeks a guarantee of success by vowing to YHWH that if victory is granted to him, he will sacrifice to YHWH "whoever [whatever] comes out" of his house first on his return from the fight (11:31). (The Hebrew allows either the personal or impersonal pronoun.)

The ensuing conflict proves victorious for Jephthah and his forces. The rejoicing is short-lived, however, for on the return to his house it is his daughter that he sees coming out to meet him. But while Jephthah bemoans the fate to which his vow has brought him, his daughter merely affirms that he must do what he has vowed to do. She asks only that she be allowed a two-month reprieve so as to spend time with her women friends on the mountains, mourning her virginity. This request is granted. When she comes back to her father, he

does with her "according to the vow he had made" (Judg 11:39).

The episode involving Jephthah's daughter, partly because of its very brevity, generates numerous questions. Readers want to know why Jephthah makes such a vow. The text does not offer any hints, such as doubts about his chances for military success. Does the spirit of YHWH actually move him to the pronouncement of the vow? And in making the vow, does he not know that it was customary in Israel for women to come out and greet with song and dance victorious male warriors upon their return from battle (compare Exod 15:19–21; 1 Sam 18:6–7) and that it is quite likely that his daughter will also follow this custom? Or does he think that an animal will be first out of his house? (Animals were often stabled in a small room inside, and quite near the entrance of, the typical Israelite house. And animals were a common object of sacrifice in ancient Israel.)

Another question concerns whether Jephthah's daughter has prior knowledge of her father's vow before she steps out of the house. The text suggests that Jephthah's vow was made in their hometown of Mizpah; if pronounced publicly, presumably she would have heard it. Perhaps that was Jephthah's intention — that she hear it and so take warning not to come out of the house first. But even if the vow was spoken in private, it is still conceivable that word could have gotten back to the daughter. And yet if the daughter did know, one wonders why she went out to greet him.

Just as troubling as the daughter's apparent complicity is that of others. We wonder why no one — not even YHWH — intervenes. In the narrative of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, YHWH sends an angel to prevent the killing. That sacrifice, however, was YHWH's idea in the first place (Gen 22:1–14). And why do the people of the community not countermand the vow's fulfillment? Why do the women friends of the daughter not convince her to run away and so escape her doom? And where is the daughter's mother? Why is she not even mentioned in this story, much less presented as an advocate for her daughter?

Another ambiguity of the narrative concerns

the daughter's actual fate. The text does not explicitly state that Jephthah actually kills her. Perhaps he merely offers her up to the service of YHWH; presumably she would have then gone to work for a lifetime in a sanctuary dedicated to YHWH. In that case, the lamenting done by both father and daughter would have concerned the loss for the daughter of the normative Israelite roles of wife and mother (a tragedy for Jephthah, too, since she is his only child and, without her children, his patrimony will most likely be lost forever.)

Finally, what is the function of this story in the biblical text? Some suggest that it is meant to point up the rash and foolish behavior of Jephthah. But his unconscionable behavior would also have been a sign of Israel's depravity and thus an argument for instituting monarchical rule, presumably a more stable and upright form of government than what is currently in place. This message is here mediated primarily through the victimization of a woman. Women's lives and reproductive potential were essential for community and family survival. The loss of the daughter perhaps represents, in dramatic form, the dangers (amid apparent success) of the leadership of the judges. As a potential mother, the daughter represents the future for family and community. Her father's shortsightedness signifies the chaos of premonarchic life.

Despite the possibilities of comprehending the narrative as part of the propaganda of the Book of Judges, the story of Jephthah's daughter remains enigmatic and disturbing to today's readers. Indeed, this tale of a nameless young woman, with scarcely a voice of her own and with her violent fate precipitated and carried out by her own father, is surely one of the most horrifying tales in the whole Bible.

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SEE ALSO Part II: Women with Hand-Drums, Dancing (Exod 15:20, etc.); Daughter (or Son or Child) Passed Through Fire, Burned, or Sacrificed (Deut 12:31, etc.); Companions of Jephthah's Daughter (Judg 11:37–38); Daughters of Israel Lamenting Jephthah's Daughter (Judg 11:40).

FOR FURTHER READING: Day, Peggy L. "From the Child Is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter."

Exum, J. Cheryl. "Murder They Wrote."

Fewell, Danna Nolan. "Judges."

Trible, Phyllis. "The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice."

JUDG 11:37–38

Companions of Jephthah's Daughter

These women accompany Jephthah's daughter during her two months of mourning — presumably to support her and even to participate in the grieving over her imminent death. It has been suggested that their mourning rite subsequently became regularized in Israelite society; that is, it came to be a custom for young women to go out annually together (see Judg 11:40). Some have further suggested that this custom functioned as a rite of passage: a formal recognition, by means of ritual, of the crossover from childhood to adulthood; for women, such a rite would have signaled their readiness for marriage. However, other evidence for the existence of such a rite in ancient Israel is lacking. Still, the passage does seem to indicate the presence of women-only associations — informal and formal networks that contributed to female social power — in the biblical world.

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SEE ALSO Part II: Daughter of Jephthah (Judg 11:34–40); Daughters of Israel Lamenting Jephthah's Daughter (Judg 11:40); Women of the Neighborhood (Ruth 4:17); Mourning Women (Jer 9:17–22, etc.).

JUDG 11:40

Daughters of Israel Lamenting Jephthah's Daughter

Certain ritual practices in ancient Israel, as in many cultures, are relegated to men; so too are some the

prerogative of women. The androcentric interests of the Hebrew Bible rarely are concerned with women's practices, whether they are part of household religion or wider community observance. One exception is a custom tied to the tragic death of Jephthah's daughter in fulfillment of a vow made by her father. According to Judg 11:40, the "daughters of Israel" would annually commemorate the death of Jephthah's daughter with four days of lamenting. This reference to Israelite daughters perhaps designates Israelite women in general; but more likely it has in mind females like Jephthah's daughter — unmarried females still residing in their parental homes.

The details of the commemorative practice are not given, but the fact that these young women "go out" to carry out this custom indicates that it was not done in a domestic setting. Perhaps they went out into the hills near Mizpah (where the death had occurred), just as the companions of Jephthah's daughter had done at the time of her death (Judg 11:38).

Several features of the annual event are noteworthy. As a practice carried out only by women, it is one example of the social and religious practices that were part of the lives of Israelite women but are not generally visible in the androcentric biblical record. Like the wailing after her death, the commemorative mourning is particularly suitable for an annual female custom, given the fact that women, rather than men, tended to be specialists in funerary practices in ancient Israel. This custom also provides an example of female bonding; the dynamics of a single-gender gathering that lasted for four days inevitably would have fostered extensive interaction, shared experience, and a sense of connection. Finally, it is unusual, among biblical rituals, in marking a human character rather than a divine deed or a seasonal event.

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SEE ALSO Part II: Daughter of Jephthah (Judg 11:34–40); Companions of Jephthah's Daughter (Judg 11:37–38); Mourning Women (Jer 9:17–22, etc.).

FOR FURTHER READING: Ackerman, Susan. *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*.

Bird, Phyllis. "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus."

JUDG 12:9

Daughters (and Sons) and Daughters-in-Law (and Sons-in-Law) of Ibzan

One of the minor judges (a leader without an attached narrative) in the Book of Judges is a Bethlehemite named Ibzan. He is said to have had sixty children, thirty of each gender. That number seems to be significant, perhaps as an indication of power; note that another minor judge, Jair, is said to have had thirty sons riding on thirty donkeys in thirty towns (Judg 10:3–4; see also 14:13, 19). Ibzan may have been a regional chieftain who controlled a large number of settlements (thirty), each represented by a son placed in a local leadership role. He would then have doubled his domain (from thirty to sixty) by using the patronage system, that is, by marrying his daughters to families in settlements outside his domain.

The NRSV translation "outside his clan" is misleading, because no word for "clan" appears in the Hebrew text. In any case, the marriages of Ibzan's offspring epitomize the pattern of sons maintaining the father's lineage or position by marrying women from outside the immediate family group and of daughters being sent out to marry. The idea of "outside" here does not mean that spouses were obtained from non-Israelites, but rather from Israelite groups somewhat more distant than usual.

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part II: Daughters of the Inhabitants of the Land as Marriage Partners (Exod 34:16, etc.).

JUDG 13:2–25; 14:2–9, 16; 16:17

Mother of Samson

The birth announcement of a son to a sterile woman is a typical biblical scene. Here no back-