

Jephthah—Victimizer and Victim: A Comparison of Jephthah and Characters in Genesis

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Introduction

Jephthah is very much an atypical judge. He is the only one of Israel's deliverers who was not appointed by God, but by human beings, the elders of Gilead, after protracted negotiations between them. The Lord's involvement in the liberation of Israel from the Ammonite yoke is extremely limited (in stark contrast to the Gideon cycle) and associated chiefly with the tragic side of the story—the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter to the Lord, as a result of Jephthah's vow. Yairah Amit sees Jephthah as a disappointing judge: he is not appointed by God; he utters a rash and irresponsible vow that at the very least includes the possibility of a human sacrifice,¹ thereby bringing down catastrophe on himself and on his daughter. On the national plane, he is not wise enough to prevent a civil war against the Ephraimites (unlike Gideon in a similar situation). Amit contends that the editor of the Book of Judges places the stories of Jephthah and Samson—another disappointing judge—toward its end, in order to prepare readers for the corrective of the monarchy, explicitly foreshadowed in the two narratives that constitute the “appendices” to the book.²

Jephthah is a hybrid character in many senses: in terms of his status and role he may be one of the major judges or one of the minor judges.³ With regard to his ancestry—his father was a Gileadite named Gilead (a piece of information that sharpens

1. Even if we accept the opinion that Jephthah left the way open to sacrifice an animal, it is clear that he had also entertained the possibility of a human sacrifice; otherwise he would not have been horrified by the sight of his daughter coming out to greet him and would never have imagined that he must sacrifice her in order to fulfill his vow. T. H. Gaster (*Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament* [New York, 1969], 430) offers parallels from Greek literature of a hero's vow to sacrifice the first person who comes to greet him on his return from war and is consequently compelled to sacrifice his son. These parallels reinforce the argument that Jephthah always had a human sacrifice in mind but did not expect that it would be his only daughter.

2. Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, trans. J. Chipman (Leiden, 1992), 76–77, 85–92. Elie Assis (*Self-Interest or Communal Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives* [Judg 6–12], *VTSup* 106 [Leiden, 2005], 175–237), too, emphasizes Jephthah's egocentricity and the fact that he was always motivated by personal rather than national interests. J. Cheryl Exum (“The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *CBQ* 52 [1990], 410–31, at 421 n. 22) believes that Jephthah was the worst of all the judges—in polar antithesis to Robert Boling's opinion (*Judges*, AB 6A [Garden City, NY, 1975], 214) that “Jephthah was a good judge, the best since Othniel.”

3. See, e.g., Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, *JSOTSup* 68 (Sheffield, 1988), 83; Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold,” 421. See also the literature cited by Exum (loc. cit., n. 19).

the sense of his belonging to the land of Gilead and thereby the sense of the injustice done to Jephthah, the son of Gilead, by being expelled from the land of Gilead), but his mother was a harlot.⁴ As for his characterization, there are lines of both similarity and contrast with Gideon, with the accent on the contrast, as well as with the unsavory Abimelech, with the accent on the similarities between them.⁵

In the present article I shall consider a new aspect of Jephthah as a mixed character—both victim and victimizer. This view is sharpened in the light of the intertextual links between Jephthah and four characters in Genesis, two of them victimizers (Abraham and Lot) and two of them victims (Ishmael and Isaac).⁶ The analogies between the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter and that of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), and between the figures of Jephthah and Abraham have already been noted in the literature.⁷ I will reinforce this analogy and offer others, between Jephthah and Lot, Ishmael, and Isaac, as yet unnoted in the literature, and will look into the overall significance of these parallels.

4. See Greger Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives: A Critical Examination of Some Synchronic Studies of the Book of Judges* (Örebro, 2001), 85; Assis, *Self-Interest*, 192. The reference to Jephthah as the son of a harlot (Judg. 11:1) may be symbolic. The Bible repeatedly casts idolatry as harlotry (e.g., Deut. 31:16; Judg. 2:17; 8:27, 33; cf. Edward L. Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson," *Prooftexts* 1 [1981], 237–60, at 249). The fact that the Israelites turned to the son of a harlot, after the Lord failed to answer them, may suggest that their repentance is not genuine, but merely functional. In addition, the dichotomous description of Jephthah as the son of Gilead and the son of a harlot may indicate that even though he worshipped the Lord (as the son of Gilead), as demonstrated by the fact that he attributes his victory to the Lord (Judg. 11:9, 21–24) and makes a vow to the Lord (vv. 30–31), his faith is still sullied by foreign elements that diverge from the pure Israelite faith (as the son of a harlot), as manifested by the content of his vow, which, though made to the Lord, deals with human sacrifice. (Lion Feuchtwanger, in his *Jefta und seine Tochter*, makes Jephthah's mother an Ammonite captive of war whom his father preferred to his legal wife. His wife, too, is Ammonite. [I thank Lenn Schramm for calling my attention to Feuchtwanger's vivid retelling of the story.]).

5. See, e.g., Amit, *Judges*, 88–90; Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, *VTSup* 63 (Leiden, 1996), 202–3; Assis, *Self-Interest*, 198–99, 226–28, 236 (comparison to Gideon), 247–48, 237 (comparison to Abimelech). This contrasts with H. W. Hertzberg's claim (*Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth*, *ATD* 9 [Göttingen, 1969], 215) that Jephthah is depicted as the positive antithesis of Abimelech and that in general he is described in extremely positive terms.

6. Yair Zakovitch ("On the Canon of the Heart: The Genetics of Canonization in Hebrew Literature," *Jewish Studies* 42 [2003/4], 5–18, at 11 [Hebrew]) notes the importance of Genesis for characterization throughout the Bible: "Genesis is in many respects the 'table of contents' or even the 'genetic code' of biblical historiography. The writers of these chronicles frequently pepper their works with allusions to Genesis, even when their message is not identical with and is sometimes even the opposite of that presented by the texts of Genesis." On the intertextual links between Judges and Genesis, see Francis Landy, "Gilead and the Fatal Word," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1986), Division A, 39–44, who also mentions one between the story of Jephthah and that of Rachel and the teraphim in Genesis 31.

7. See, e.g., Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London, 1969), 37–38; Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, 1984), 101; David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock, TX, 1986), 38–40; J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge, 1992), 51; and especially Yair Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass: Reflection Stories in the Bible* (Tel Aviv, 1995), 72–74 [Hebrew]. Pseudo-Philo (*Biblical Antiquities* 40,2) makes the link between the binding of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter explicit. Jephthah's daughter, there called Seila, reminds her father of the binding of Isaac as a constitutive event and stresses that Isaac consented to be sacrificed to the Lord with a full and willing heart. See in greater detail Cheryl Anne Brown, *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women* (Louisville, KY, 1992), 103; Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass*, 73.

A. Jephthah and Abraham: The Binding of Isaac and the Binding of Jephthah's Daughter

Points of Similarity

In addition to the common subject of the two stories—the sacrifice of a son or daughter to the Lord—there are linguistic and plot similarities as well.

1. The Lord commands Abraham, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and *offer him there as a burnt offering*” (Gen. 22:2). Jephthah makes a vow to the Lord: “whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, and I will *offer him up for a burnt offering*” (Judg. 11:31).
2. In the Lord’s charge to Abraham he refers to Isaac as “*your only*,” thereby emphasizing the ruthlessness of the demand and the magnitude of Abraham’s ordeal (Gen. 22:2; see also v. 12).⁸ To the description of Jephthah’s daughter’s coming out to meet him, the narrator adds an explanatory note—“She was his *only* child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter” (Judg. 11:34)—so as to emphasize the magnitude of the tragedy that has befallen him.
3. In both stories there is a dialogue between father and child, who use the affectionate phrases “my father” (Gen. 22:7; Judg. 11:36) and “my son/my daughter” (Gen. 22:7, 8; Judg. 11:35).⁹
4. Abraham is commanded to offer his son as a sacrifice, “*upon one of the mountains* of which I shall tell you” (Gen. 22:2). Jephthah’s daughter asks her father, “Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go and wander *on the mountains*, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions” (Judg. 11:37). After he consents, we read, “and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity *upon the mountains*” (v. 38).
5. The idea that it is the Lord who selects the sacrifice to be offered to Him is stated explicitly in Abraham’s reply to Isaac, “God will see to the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (Gen. 22:8). It also stands implicitly behind Jephthah’s vow to sacrifice whatever comes out to meet him first (Judg. 11:31). Jephthah leaves it to the Lord, as it were, to choose the sacrifice to be offered to Him.¹⁰
6. Both stories have an etiological element. Near the end of the story of the binding of Isaac we read “So Abraham called the name of that place the Lord will see; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount the Lord will be seen’” (Gen. 22:14). The story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter ends with an explanation of the Israelite maidens’ custom of going away (undoubtedly to the hills) to mourn¹¹ Jephthah’s daughter four days a year (Judg. 11:40).¹²
7. The binding of Isaac has a long-lasting influence. As a consequence of Abraham’s obedience to the Lord, his progeny will be blessed, and he will also be invoked as a blessing for all the nations of the earth (Gen. 22:16–18). The story of Jephthah’s daughter also continues to exert an influence, in the form of the Israelite maidens’ custom of going away into the hills to lament for her (Judg. 11:40). Although its influence is much more limited than that of the binding of Isaac, of

8. Isaac, of course, is not Abraham’s only son, but this is the narrative’s way of emphasizing that he is the favorite and that Ishmael “does not count.” See Mieke Bal, “Between Altar and Wandering Rock: Toward a Feminist Philology,” in Mieke Bal, ed., *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women’s Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, 1989), 211–31, at 221.

9. Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass*, 73.

10. Similarly, “Jephthah leaves the victim to chance, i.e., to fate, i.e., to God” (Landy, “Gilead,” 42).

11. The sense of the verb *תנה* is somewhat obscure. The normal interpretation is that it here means “lament” or “mourn”—the rendering of the Septuagint and the Vulgate. The immediate context—Jephthah’s daughter’s trek to the hills to weep for her maidenhood—may support this. But the verb appears elsewhere only once in the Bible: “there *תנו*? the victories (*צדקות*) of the Lord” (Judg. 5:11), where lament/mourn is hardly appropriate. Accordingly many understand it as meaning “commemorate” or “recite,” which suits both occurrences. Whatever the lexical meaning of the verb *תנה*, however, it is clear to me that the women sang dirges for Jephthah’s daughter, offered as a human sacrifice in her youth before she was able to establish a family.

12. Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass*, 73.

course, restricted to Israel (in fact, to the women of Gilead), it still goes beyond the immediate family and time of the event recounted in the story.

Points of Difference

The similarities between the stories of Abraham and Jephthah throw the differences between them into sharper relief.

1. Abraham is commanded by the Lord to sacrifice his son. The goal of this command was to subject Abraham to a trial and to test the extent of his devotion to the Lord. Jephthah, by contrast, received no command whatsoever from the Lord. His relationship with the Lord is one-way, expressed in his reckless vow, which ultimately compels him to sacrifice his daughter.¹³
2. In the story of the binding of Isaac, father and son are partners in the trek to the hills.¹⁴ Jephthah's daughter goes out to the hills with her friends, without her father, who has no place in this sisterhood that offers emotional support to his daughter.
3. Abraham replies evasively in an attempt to shelter his son and conceal his intention of sacrificing him (Gen. 22:8). Jephthah does not hide her fate from his daughter. In fact, he addresses her accusingly rather than protectively.¹⁵ It is hardly Jephthah's finest hour when, in his tragic encounter with his daughter, he focuses totally on himself and his tragedy, and even dares to blame the victim, his daughter, for the catastrophe he has brought upon her: "Alas, daughter! You have brought me low; you have become my troubler!" (Judg. 11:35).¹⁶
4. Isaac, of course, is saved; Jephthah's daughter is not. The crisis of the binding of Isaac is resolved *deus ex machina*. At the critical moment, when Abraham is about to kill his son, an angel of the Lord calls to him from heaven and stays his hand before he can commit the terrible deed. In Judges 11, by contrast, the Lord does not intervene, His voice is not heard, and the atrocity—the immolation of Jephthah's daughter by her father—is not prevented.
5. The last point of difference—rescue versus immolation—leads to a difference in the mode of narrative: as the story of the binding of Isaac approaches its climax, the pace slows down, heightening the drama and intensifying readers' suspense. Unlike the normal practice of biblical narrative, the incident is described in detail, especially its climactic moment: "Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay¹⁷ his son" (Gen. 22:10). Because the story has a happy end, readers can cope with the stark description of the preparations for slaughter; in the

13. Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, 1988), 109. Some criticize Jephthah for the very fact of uttering a vow; e.g., Tribble (*Texts of Terror*, 97) sees the vow as manipulative and "an act of unfaithfulness." Similarly, Samuel P. Roberts ("Content and Form within the Jephthah Narrative: A Literary-Historical Investigation" [Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991; available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, MI], 201–2) sees the vow as a manifestation of one of Jephthah's negative traits—his relating to all those around him, even the Lord, through manipulation and bargaining. But vows, including conditional vows, were an integral part of the world of biblical society (see, e.g., Jacob's vow [Gen. 28:20–22]; the vow made by the Israelites in the wilderness [Num. 21:2]; and Hannah's vow [1 Sam. 1:11]). The problem, as I see it, is not the fact of Jephthah's vow, but its content.

14. Bal (*Death & Dissymmetry*, 110) sees the shared journey of father and son and the trial of the binding as a sort of transition rite. She notes that in many societies with such rites the fathers treat their sons cruelly as part of the test of their virility. Accordingly, the journey to the hills must be undertaken in the company of the father, who is also the source of the peril. Although I find her theory fascinating, we must remember that from the story's own perspective, the trial of the binding of Isaac is not a test of Isaac's manhood but of Abraham's faith. That is, it focuses on Abraham and not on Isaac.

15. Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass*, 74.

16. Tribble (*Texts of Terror*, 102), followed by many since, noted the blaming of the victim here.

17. The verb שחט is found in the story of Jephthah, too, in the context of the slaughter of the fleeing Ephraimites (Judg. 12:6). Whereas Abraham is about to kill his son in obedience to a divine injunction, Jephthah bears sole responsibility for the merciless slaughter of members of his own people, the result of

end, when the catastrophe is averted, they are left with a vast sense of relief and a discharge of tension. By contrast, in the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, which does not have a happy end, the narrator notes the climax briefly and obliquely, noting that her father "did with her according to his vow which he had made" (Judg. 11:39). In this case a detailed description would be unbearable.¹⁸

6. After passing the test of being willing to sacrifice his only son, Abraham is blessed with his progeny being as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore (Gen. 22:16–17).¹⁹ Jephthah, by contrast, sacrifices his only daughter and thereby dooms himself to having no descendants.
7. The Lord *swears* to Abraham that his offspring will be numerous (Gen. 22:16); Jephthah utters a *vow* to the Lord whose tragic consequences are the obliteration of his line (Judg. 11:30–31).²⁰ Abraham's descendants—so the Lord promises him—will overcome their enemies (Gen. 22:17). But it is precisely because Jephthah overcame his enemies that his descendants are destroyed.
8. The verb **עשה** appears in the story of the binding of Isaac at the moment of rescue. The angel of the Lord instructs Abraham: "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do (**עשה**) anything to him" (Gen. 22:12). In the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter the verb **עשה** appears in the context of the tragic fulfillment of the vow and the sacrifice of the daughter, both in her words to her father, "do (**עשה**) to me according to what has gone forth from your mouth" (Judg. 11:36), and in the narrator's laconic report that her father "did (**עשה**) with her according to his vow which he had made" (Judg. 11:39).
9. In the story of the binding of Isaac, the verb **ראה** occurs once in association with the place where the sacrifice is supposed to take place ("Abraham . . . saw [**ראה**] the place afar off" [Gen. 22:4]), but chiefly in the context of Isaac's deliverance. Retrospectively, there is already a hint of the possibility of a substitute for Isaac in Abraham's evasive reply to his son, "God will see (**ראה**) to the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (v. 8) (even if Abraham himself did not have this in mind and is not aware of the possibility). Indeed, after the appearance of the angel who instructs Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac, we read, "And Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw (**ראה**), and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns" (v. 13). God has indeed seen to the sacrifice He desires, brought it to Abraham, and caused him to see it, so that Abraham can offer it as a sacrifice instead of his son. In the wake of the miracle, Abraham calls the place "The

a contest for prestige and power. He does not suspend the killing even after they have been defeated and no longer pose a threat.

18. See, e.g., Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 105; Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 110. Bal does not spare readers' feelings and fills in the lacunae left by the story, drawing for this on the binding of Isaac (*ibid.*, 110–11). By contrast, Esther Fuchs ("Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Judges* [Sheffield, 1993], 116–30, especially 116, 129–30) ascribes the story's nonspecific and vague language to an attempt to cover up the fact of the father's sacrifice of his daughter, so that readers can deny that the awful act took place (even though it did). She argues that this intentional obscurity is compatible with the apologetic tone that the story adopts vis-à-vis Jephthah. I believe that the characterization of Jephthah is less positive than Fuchs believes. Marcus (*Jephthah and His Vow*, 40) sees the vague language as another detail in the intentional uncertainty that is left, he claims, by the biblical narrator as to whether Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter or sentenced her to a life of ascetic seclusion. See his exposition of the history of exegesis on the question (*ibid.*, 8–9), and the analysis of the contrasting views (*passim*). For a critique of Marcus's argument, see Joshua A. Berman, "Medieval Monasticism and the Evolution of Jewish Interpretation of the Story of Jephthah's Daughter," *JQR* 95 (2005), 228–56. The present article starts from the assumption that the story is about the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter to the Lord, taking Jephthah's vow at face value: "whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me . . . shall be the Lord's, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:31).

19. The story of the binding of Isaac is followed immediately by the genealogy of Abraham's brother Nahor (Gen. 22:20–24). In contrast to the normal biblical practice of silently passing over daughters, Rebecca's name is included there (v. 23)—clearly because she is the intended bride of Isaac and it is through her that the blessing of offspring to Abraham will be fulfilled.

20. On the similarity between oath and vow, see Nagnus Ottoson, *Gilead: Tradition and History* (Lund, 1969), 170–71.

Lord will see”; the narrator adds an etiological note that links the story with his readers: “as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount the Lord will be seen’” (v. 14).²¹ The meaning here is somewhat obscure,²² but it clearly has to do with a link between the Lord and His devotees, and evidently also with the divine revelation on Mount Moriah and the divine grace that the Lord shows to those who are faithful to Him. In the story of Jephthah, by contrast, the verb ראה appears at the dramatic and tragic climax, when Jephthah discovers the magnitude of the catastrophe from which there is no return: “And when he saw her, he rent his clothes” (Judg. 11:35).

10. The story of the binding of Isaac concludes with the words, “So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-Sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-Sheba” (Gen. 22:19). The hero’s return home is a common finale in biblical narratives; here it signals readers that the conflict has been resolved, the story has reached a point of resolution, and everything has been settled peacefully.²³ Even though the text does not say so explicitly, Abraham certainly returned home with his son Isaac, who had just been saved from death.²⁴ In the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, Jephthah’s return home (Judg. 11:34) is not the end of the story but the beginning of a new plot line—the tragedy of the sacrifice of his daughter.²⁵ She, too, returns from the hills to her father so that he may fulfill his vow and sacrifice her: “And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had made” (Judg. 11:39).²⁶

B. Jephthah and Lot: Fathers who Victimize their Virgin Daughters

The parallels between Jephthah and Lot involve their victimization of their virgin daughters.

Points of Similarity

1. Lot is prepared to surrender his two virgin daughters to the depraved mob of Sodomites in order to protect his two male guests (who are really angels, though he does not know this). Jephthah

21. Or: “He will be seen on the mountain of the Lord.” Astonishingly, the name of the place is left out and only the midrashic interpretation of the name appears. “The Lord will see” (ה’ יראה) is a pun on Moriah (מוריה).

22. What will the Lord see? Abraham’s obedience? The sacrifice? Who will be seen on the mountain of the Lord? The person who comes to worship the Lord in the holy temple, in fulfillment of the obligation of pilgrimage? Or perhaps it is the Lord Himself who will appear to His believers? (Cf. 2 Chron. 3:1, where the Lord appears to David on Mount Moriah.)

23. In Genesis 21 Abraham is in Beersheba. On the hero’s return home to normal life, see Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, trans. D. Shefer-Vanson and the author, *JSOTSup* 70 (Sheffield, 2000), 129–30.

24. The omission of Isaac from the concluding verse prompted the midrashic account that Isaac did not return home with his father but was sent to study Torah in the House of Study run by Shem son of Noah; e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 56, 11. Uriel Simon (“Appendix: Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative,” *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, trans. L. J. Schramm [Bloomington, 1997], 263–69, at 265) explains Isaac’s absence at the end of the story as stemming from the normal custom of biblical narrative with regard to secondary characters and the fact that Isaac is a secondary character in the story of the binding of Isaac. Biblical stories focus on the protagonists; the supporting cast is there chiefly for the needs of the plot, to illuminate the situation, or to cast light on the leading character. The narrator may conceal them until the moment they are needed (see, e.g., Elijah’s servant who appears suddenly in 1 Kgs. 18:43) and forget about them after they have played their role.

25. Jonathan Jacobs, “The Story of Jephthah” (M.A. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 1997), 54 [Hebrew].

26. On the verb שׁוּב as a key word in the story of Jephthah, see Marcus *Jephthah and His Vow*, 53; Exum, *Tragedy*, 52.

sacrifices his virgin daughter to the Lord, in fulfillment of his vow. Lot proposes to the mob, “Behold, I have two daughters who have not known a man” (Gen. 19:8)—their virginity is evidently noted in order to make this alternative more attractive to the Sodomites. The biblical narrator emphasizes that Jephthah’s daughter “had never known a man” (Judg. 11:39), to highlight the tragedy of the house of Jephthah.

2. Referring to his guests, the Sodomites demand of Lot: “bring them out (הוֹצִיאֵם) to us, that we may know them” (Gen. 19:5). Lot goes out (יֵצֵא) to them (v. 6) and offers his two daughters as substitutes: “let me bring them out (אֲרוֹצִיאֵם) to you” (v. 8). The implication of the story is that going or bringing out is dangerous, because whatever is outside is exposed to peril.²⁷ When Lot goes out to appease the Sodomites, he is taking a calculated risk and putting himself in danger; but when he proposed to take his daughters out of his own domain and house, he is expressing his willingness to hand them over to the mob. Jephthah’s daughter is doomed when she goes out of the house to greet her father, for Jephthah made an immoral vow to take the life of the first one to come out of his house: “Then whoever comes forth (הוֹצִיא אִשֶׁר יֵצֵא) from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering” (Judg. 11:31). And when he returns home triumphant we are told, “and behold, his daughter came out (יֹצֵאתָ) to meet him” (v. 34).
3. Lot is abandoning his daughters to the mob when he proposes, “do to them as you please” (Gen. 19:8); that is, he is giving the mob unrestricted license to molest his daughters. Jephthah himself harms his daughter in a fashion from which there is no return, and the story tells us in these words that her father “did with her according to his vow which he had made” (Judg. 11:39).
4. According to biblical myth, Lot is the ancestor of Moab and Ammon (Gen. 19:30–38). The story of Jephthah deals with a war against Ammon, but in his demarche Jephthah relates to Moab and Ammon as if they were one and even mentions Moab before Ammon (Judg. 11:15), following the chronological order of their conceptions according to Genesis. This may constitute another link to the story of Lot and his daughters, meant to alert readers to the parallel between Jephthah and Lot.²⁸

Points of Difference

1. Lot is willing to hand over his daughters to be gang-raped by the men of Sodom, in order to save his guests from the tangible and immediate peril of sexual abuse and perhaps even death. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter to the Lord as a consequence of a situation for which he himself was responsible—the vow that he took. Of course he did not intend and did not want his daughter to be that sacrifice, although I believe he took a calculated risk that this might happen.²⁹
2. In the story of Sodom, as in the story of the binding of Isaac, Lot’s daughters are saved. The resolution is miraculous, through the intervention of the guests, who reveal their true angelic identity. But there is no *deus ex machina* in the story of Jephthah’s daughter, and the father sacrifices his daughter.³⁰

27. On the theme of inside versus outside in the rape story, see Yael Shemesh, “Biblical Stories of Rape: Common Traits and Unique Features,” in Rimon Kasher and Moshe Zipor, eds., *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 6 (Ramat Gan, 2002), 315–44, at 321–24 [Hebrew].

28. David Jobling (*The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible*, 2, *JSOT-Sup* 39 [Sheffield, 1986], 130) noted the connection between Jephthah’s reference to Moab and Ammon and the narrative of their conception and birth in Genesis 19, but did not see the broader context of the comparison, the way in which Lot and Jephthah treat their daughters. According to Jobling, Jephthah’s remarks are meant to deal with the claim that Moab and Ammon (viewed as brothers in biblical historiography: Gen. 19:30–38) have rights to the Transjordan.

29. See J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges, OTL* 7 (Philadelphia, 1981), 216; and n. 10 above.

30. This difference of divine intervention and rescue versus a world without miracles, in which the woman pays with her life, is also the difference between the story of Sodom and that of the concubine in Gibeah, which is constructed using the building blocks of the Sodom story.

3. Lot's daughters have children by him and he becomes the ancestor of two nations. Jephthah's daughter is immolated and he has no progeny.

C. Jephthah and Ishmael: The Victim Cast out of His Father's House

Points of Similarity

1. Both Jephthah and Ishmael are chased out of their homes and deprived of their inheritances on the pretext of their inferior birth on the maternal side. Sarah demands that Abraham "cast out (גרש) this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac" (Gen. 21:10). Jephthah's brothers tell him, "You shall not inherit in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman" (Judg. 11:2). The verb גרש in Sarah's demand (Gen. 21:10) is echoed in Jephthah's complaint to the elders of Gilead: "Did you not . . . drive me out (והגרשוני) of my father's house?" (Judg. 11:7).³¹ Ishmael and his mother are cast out as demanded by Sarah, acting to defend the interests of her own son, Isaac, Ishmael's half-brother on his father's side. Jephthah is cast out at the demand of his paternal half-brothers, acting to defend their own interests.³²
2. Hagar, pregnant with Ishmael, runs away to the wilderness to escape her abusive mistress (Gen. 16:6). Years later she is cast out with her son Ishmael and loses her way in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba (Gen. 21:14). As a result, Ishmael makes his home in the wilderness: "He grew up [and] he lived in the wilderness" (v. 20). Jephthah, evicted by his brothers from his father's house, flees beyond Israelite territory and settles in the land of Tob (Judg. 11:3).
3. Both Ishmael and Jephthah, dispossessed and shunted to the margins of society, adopt a predatory way of life in order to survive. Even while Ishmael was still *in utero* the angel announced to Hagar, of her soon-to-be-born son, "He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him" (Gen. 16:12). When he grows up he becomes "an expert with the bow" (Gen. 21:20). "Worthless fellows"—meaning those with no inheritance or property—flock to Jephthah and become his private band. The text does not state so explicitly, but evidently it made ends meet by raiding and plundering its neighbors, or by hiring out its services to those who needed warriors.

Points of Difference

1. The Lord is an active presence in the story of Ishmael. When Hagar flees to the wilderness she encounters an angel, who instructs her to go back home and submit to her mistress, along with promises of her future son (Gen. 16:7–12). After Hagar and Ishmael are cast out, an angel of the Lord appears to the weeping Hagar and saves her and Ishmael from death by dehydration by getting her to see the well, which restores her and her son to life (Gen. 21:17–19). Here too, as in the stories of Sodom and the binding of Isaac, there is a *deus ex machina* solution to severe

31. The meaning is that he was banished at the conclusion of a judicial proceeding in which the elders accepted his brothers' claim. See Samuel Feigin, "Some Cases of Adoption in Israel," *JBL* 50 (1931), 186–200, at 191; David Marcus, "The Legal Dispute Between Jephthah and the Elders," *HAR* 12 (1990), 105–14; Joseph Fleishman, "The Legality of the Expulsion of Jephthah (Judges 11:1–11)," *Diné Israel* 18 (1995–96), 61–80. Feigin and Marcus assert that Jephthah was Gilead's adopted son (they understand "was the father" [Judg. 11:1] in the sense of adoption, although Marcus believes that Gilead adopted Jephthah even though he was also his biological son). The brothers, however, explain that the reason for his dispossession is that he is the son of another woman, not that he is not his father's real son. Cf. Fleishman (*ibid.*, 74–77), who claims that Jephthah was a biological as well as a legal son of Gilead. According to Fleishman, the expulsion of Jephthah was illegal, even though it was protected by law.

32. This similarity was noted by Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin, 1974), 258, but he did not develop the parallels further.

distress and mortal peril. After the miraculous deliverance, too, we are told that “God was with the lad” (Gen. 21:20). Even Ishmael’s name is evidence of the Lord’s involvement in his birth and life. The angel of the Lord instructs Hagar to name her child Ishmael, “because the Lord has given heed (שמע) to your affliction” (Gen. 16:11). In the story of the banishment of mother and son his name is given an additional sense: the Lord hears the voice (evidently his crying or calls for help) of the dying boy: “And God heard (וישמע) the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard (שמע) the voice of the lad where he is’” (Gen. 21:17). As we have already noted, the Lord is never directly involved with Jephthah; He certainly does not intervene when Jephthah sacrifices his daughter to Him. Aside from the one-time statement, “then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah” (Judg. 11:29), which is associated with his victory over Ammon, Jephthah’s story does not give the impression that the Lord was with him or with his daughter. The Lord, who responded to Hagar’s sobs and heard Ishmael’s voice (Gen. 21:16–17), is unmoved by Jephthah’s cries (Judg. 11:35) and his daughter’s weeping (vv. 37–38).

2. The verb ראה is used in positive contexts in the biography of Ishmael. In the narrative of his birth it is associated with the angelic revelation to Hagar in the wilderness, which dealt with the boy’s future (Gen. 16:13–14). In the story of their banishment it is associated with salvation: “Then God opened her eyes, and she saw (ותרא) a well of water; and she went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink” (Gen. 21:19).³³ In the story of Jephthah’s daughter, by contrast, it is associated with the tragedy of father and daughter: “And when he saw (כראותו) her, he rent his clothes” (Judg. 11:35; see also A9 above, points of difference between the binding of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter).
3. The Lord promises the pregnant Hagar, through His angel: “I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude” (Gen. 16:10). Abraham, too, receives a promise when the Lord instructs him to heed Sarah’s demand and banish Hagar and Ishmael: “And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring” (Gen. 21:13). After the angel rescues Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, the divine message is conveyed to her: “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation” (v. 18). The story of Ishmael’s banishment concludes with the narrator’s biographical note that the lad grew up and his mother took him a wife from her original home, Egypt (v. 21). This act arouses expectations that the blessing of progeny will be fulfilled. In fact, the sons of Ishmael are enumerated later—twelve princes who settle a vast expanse of land (Gen. 25:12–18). Jephthah, by contrast, remains childless after sacrificing his only daughter, who was never married.

D. Jephthah and Isaac: The Hero Courted by His Former Foes

Points of Similarity

1. Isaac is banished from his land by Abimelech king of Gerar, who tells him, “Go away from us; for you are much mightier than we” (Gen. 26:16). He has no choice but to comply: “So Isaac departed from there, and encamped in the valley of Gerar and dwelt there” (Gen. 26:17). Even there, however, he is harassed by the shepherds of Gerar and accordingly moves again (v. 22). Jephthah is banished from his father’s estate by his brothers (Judg. 11:2) and flees to foreign territory, the land of Tob (v. 3).
2. In both cases the side that offends the hero must eventually swallow its pride and come to the hero: “Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army” (Gen. 26:26); “the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob” (Judg. 11:5).

33. As noted above (A9: Points of Difference), in the story of the binding of Isaac, too, the verb ראה is associated with salvation. In the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, though, the connection between vision and salvation is much clearer and more direct.

3. In both cases the hero responds bitterly about his treatment in the past—the enmity toward him and his banishment: “Isaac said to them, ‘Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me (וְאַתֶּם שִׂנְאֵתֶם אֹתִי) and have sent me away from you?’” (Gen. 26:27); “but Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, ‘Did you not hate me (אַתֶּם שִׂנְאֵתֶם אֹתִי), and drive me out of my father’s house? Why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?’” (Judg. 11:7).³⁴
4. In both cases the offending party explains the reasons for coming and declares the intention to establish new relations with the wounded party—a request for a treaty with Isaac in the first case (Gen. 26:28), a request that Jephthah lead the war against the Ammonites, and a willingness to accept him as the governor of all the inhabitants of Gilead in the second case (Judg. 11:6, 8).
5. In the exposition of the Jephthah story we read that “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites” (Judg. 10:7). Many have wondered why the Philistines are mentioned here, even though in the sequel we read only of a war against the Ammonites. Various conjectures have been advanced,³⁵ but the general view is that the reference to the Philistines is simply a mistake.³⁶ If my thesis of a parallel between Jephthah and Isaac is correct, however, it is possible that the Philistines are mentioned here to serve as another link between the story of Jephthah and that of Isaac in Philistine Gerar, an indication that readers should compare the two.
6. In both stories there is a territorial dispute that relates to the recent or more distant history of the Israelites or their first ancestor. The shepherds of Gerar claim title to the wells re-excavated by Isaac’s servants (Gen. 26:20–21). The narrator states plainly that these were wells that had been dug by Abraham’s servants and which the Philistines had filled up after Abraham’s death (vv. 15, 18). Jephthah conducts negotiations with the king of Ammon about that king’s territorial claim to the Transjordan, which Jephthah rebuts as unjustified, based on the history of the two nations (Judg. 11:12–27).
7. Before the territorial dispute between Isaac and the Philistines erupts, the Lord promises him, “to you and to your descendants I will *give* all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath which I swore to Abraham your father” (Gen. 26:3) and “I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will *give* to your descendants all these lands” (Gen. 26:4). One of Jephthah’s arguments in his negotiations with the King of Ammon is that the Lord had given all of the disputed land to Israel and accordingly the territory is Israelite: “And the Lord, the God of Israel, *gave* Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel” (Judg. 11:21).

Points of Difference

1. The Lord appears to Isaac, instructs him not to go down to Egypt despite the famine, and promises him, among other things, that he will possess Canaan (Gen. 26:2–5). The story of the dispute between Isaac and the Philistines is thus set in the theological frame of the Lord’s promise that Isaac and his descendants will inherit the land (see above, points of similarities, D7). The Lord does not appear to Jephthah, does not give him instructions, and promises him nothing.
2. The dispute between Isaac and the Philistines reaches a peaceable resolution. Isaac does not quarrel with Abimelech when the latter banishes him, nor does he quarrel with the shepherds when they steal the wells dug or restored by his servants. Ultimately the reason for Isaac’s banishment by the Philistines—“you are much mightier than we” (Gen. 26:16)—is also the reason for their later change in attitude. Abimelech and his courtiers come to Isaac with a request: “Let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you” (v. 28). The dispute between Jephthah and the Ammonites is not resolved peaceably, despite Jephthah’s efforts at diplomacy

34. On this similarity see also Fleishman, “The Legality,” 78, n. 50.

35. For a summary of the various opinions about the mention of the Philistines here, see Dale Sumner De Witt, “The Jephthah Traditions: A Rhetorical and Literary Study in the Deuteronomistic History” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1987; available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, MI), 82–83.

36. E.g., George F. Moore remarks that in their present context the words “the hand of the Philistines” “are manifestly out of place” (*Judges*, ICC [Edinburgh, 1895], 277).

(Judg. 11:12–28). Later, when the Ephraimites provoke Jephthah, he does not even attempt to negotiate (in stark contrast to his own approach to the Ammonites and Gideon’s policy with the same Ephraimites), but immediately launches a civil war in which 42,000 Ephraimites are killed. The slaughter of the Ephraimites continues even when they are fleeing to their homes and no longer pose a threat to Jephthah (Judg. 12:1–6).

3. Abimelech and his courtiers propose a non-aggression pact to Isaac after they realize that the Lord is with him, as is evident from their statement: “We see plainly that the Lord is with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you” (Gen. 26:28). They even refer to him as “the blessed of the Lord” (v. 29). The elders of Gilead, by contrast, come to Jephthah in their distress, having no other options, because of his proven skill as the commander of a band of warriors and the elders’ inability to provide military leadership against Ammon—but not because they have seen that the Lord is with him.
4. Isaac has a wife, Rebecca; the relations between them are described as loving (Gen. 24:67), fond, and physically intimate (26:8). So far as the text is concerned, Jephthah’s wife does not exist; we cannot help wondering whether the mother of his daughter was still alive at the time of the story. In any case, the story’s silence about her amplifies the sense of the hero’s isolation and barrenness after the sacrifice of his daughter.
5. Isaac sees a blessing in the fact that the shepherds of Gerar do not contend with him for the third well, and accordingly he names it Rehoboth (רְחוֹבוֹת), explaining, “for now the Lord has made room (הֲרַחֵם) for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Gen. 26:22). There is a firm basis for this hope, since the Lord has already promised him that He will fulfill His oath to his father, which includes the promise that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens (vv. 2–4). After Isaac’s conflict with Abimelech and the shepherds, too, the Lord appears to him and promises him, “I am with you and will bless you and multiply your descendants for my servant Abraham’s sake” (v. 24). In place of the Lord’s oath to the hero, Jephthah, that he will have numerous progeny, the hero’s progeny is cut off as a result of a vow that he himself made to the Lord. One may say that God promises and gives progeny to Isaac, whereas Jephthah promises (unwittingly) and gives his progeny to God.
6. Isaac’s name emphasizes the miracle of his birth. Hearing the divine promise that Sarah will bear him a son, Abraham laughs to himself—a laugh of disbelief (Gen. 17:17)—and is accordingly commanded to name the son who will be born Isaac (יִצְחָק [v. 19]). Sarah, too, laughs to herself, skeptical of the good tidings brought by the angels disguised as wayfarers (18:12–15). Their doubts about the news merely intensify the impact of the miracle. The root יצחק underlies another name midrash for Isaac, when Sarah says, after his birth, “God has made laughter (צִחֻק) for me; every one who hears will laugh (יִצְחָק) over me” (Gen. 21:6). It seems, however, that here the laughter of disbelief of 17:17 and 18:12–15 has been replaced by joyful laughter.³⁷ In contrast to the laughter of disbelief and joy, which emphasizes the miraculous nature of Isaac’s birth, in the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, who remains without a name, we hear the sounds of distress and mourning. Jephthah cries out in agony—“Alas!”—when he sees his daughter coming out to greet him with drums and dances (Judg. 11:35). Jephthah’s daughter goes off to the mountains with her friends to lament her maidenhood (vv. 37–38). It is plausible that the women who conduct their annual four-day rite of commemoration (v. 40) are mourning for the young girl sacrificed in her maidenhood, whatever the meaning of the verb תָּנָה.³⁸
7. Both names—Isaac and Jephthah—are third-person future verbs. Isaac, as we have seen, expresses the magnitude of the miracle of birth. I think that Jephthah’s name too, is meant symbolically, to emphasize the magnitude of his tragedy. It is a shortened form of a theophoric name derived from the ancient Semitic root פָּתַח “open.” Elsewhere in the Bible we find the Levite Pethahiah (פֶּתַח־אֵל [Neh. 9:5 and 11:24]) and the place name the Valley of Iphtahel (פֶּתַח־אֵל)

37. See, e.g., John Skinner, *Genesis, ICC* (New York, 1925), 321; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis, WBC* (Waco, Texas, 1994), 2.80–81; Irmtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel’s Beginnings*, trans. L. M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN, 2005), 34–35. Compare the response of Danel, the father of Aqhat, who laughs joyously when he is told that a son will be born to him. See H. L. Ginsberg in *ANET*, 150.

38. On this, see above, n. 11.

[Josh. 19:14, 27]). Jephthah's name probably refers to the Lord's opening the womb.³⁹ If this conjecture is sound, the hero's name is ironic: the Lord opens the womb of Jephthah's wife once only, producing a daughter. But the Lord will not open the womb of the daughter, who is sacrificed while still a maid. For Jephthah, this means the extinction of his family line. It is possible our story adds another meaning to the name Jephthah, one that alludes to the source of his tragedy—the fateful moment when he *opens* his mouth to the Lord (Judg. 11:35–36) and vows a human sacrifice.⁴⁰

8. In both stories the father's utterance determines his children's fate; but how great is the difference! In Isaac's case he blesses his sons. First he mistakenly gives Jacob a blessing of fertile soil and dominion over his brothers (Gen. 27:28–29). Then he gives the victimized Esau a consolation blessing, which also deals with fertile land and includes the possibility of shaking off his brother's yoke (vv. 39–40). Most important for us, before Isaac sends Jacob off to Laban's house to find a wife, he gives him—this time knowingly and intentionally—the blessing of Abraham: “God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your descendants with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings which God gave to Abraham!” (Gen. 28:3–4). Jephthah's utterance is not a blessing that he gives to his daughter, but a vow taken to the Lord, which compels him to sacrifice his daughter and to destroy his house with his own hand.⁴¹

The Overall Significance of the Parallels between Genesis and the Jephthah Story

The Genesis stories that I have compared to the story of Jephthah have several common denominators: conspicuous divine involvement in these tales of the miraculous deliverance of individuals and of the nations descended from them (Israel, Ammon and Moab, the Ishmaelite tribes). The stories deal with continuity and promises of offspring. In the stories of the binding of Isaac, of Ishmael, and of Isaac in Gerar we hear a divine promise of numerous offspring to an individual (Abraham, Hagar, Isaac).

Jephthah's story, by contrast, is a tragic tale of the extinction of Jephthah's family line, a consequence of his own rash speech. The Lord does not intervene to save the daughter and her father, just as He does not act directly and fully to deliver His people. The story seems to describe a rupture between Israel and its God, and between Jephthah and his God. The divine involvement in the story is limited as well as ambivalent. In the introduction to the story we read of a conflict between Israel and the Lord on the one hand, and between the Lord and Himself concerning His attitude toward

39. As is proposed by Boling, *Judges*, 197; Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 94; E. John Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land: A Commentary on the Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids, 1990), 112; Roberts, “Content and Form,” 205; Exum, *Tragedy*, 48. In the biblical worldview it is the Lord who controls female fertility. He can seal a woman's womb (Gen. 20:18; 1 Sam. 1:5, 6) or open it (Gen. 29:31; 30:22).

40. Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. P. Hackett (Ramat Gan, 1991), 105–6; Exum, *Tragedy*, 48. On the saving and killing power of words in the story of Jephthah, see Exum, *ibid.*, 60–65. The verb used in vv. 35–36 for “open the mouth” is פצה, which is generally synonymous with the more common פתח (e.g., Num. 16:30 and 32; Ezek. 2:8 and 3:2). Both are associated with speech, which involves opening the mouth. (For the collocation פתח פה in the sense of speech, see, e.g., Isa. 53:7; Ezek. 3:27; 33:22; Prov. 31:26. For פצה פה in the same sense, see Ps. 22:14 [13]; Job 35:16; Lam. 2:16; 3:46.) It is possible that here פצה was preferred to פתח in order to create a play on words with the city of Mizpah, where, evidently, Jephthah uttered his vow.

41. Jacobs (“The Story of Jephthah,” 65–66) notes that the word בית is a leading word in the Jephthah story, accompanying both his rise and his fall.

Israel on the other.⁴² At first it seems as if the Lord has abandoned Israel. The Israelites cry out to Him, but He reproves them and declares that He will not deliver them again (Judg. 10:10–14). They do not give up, however, and plead: “We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to thee; only deliver us, we pray thee, this day” (v. 15). The import of the Lord’s reaction to their plea and their removal of foreign gods from among them is obscure.⁴³ To judge from the context, the Lord responded in part to the people’s cries. Even though we are not told of His direct involvement in Jephthah’s nomination (such a statement would be incompatible with the overt divine displeasure with the Israelites and some of Jephthah’s character traits, which make him inappropriate for his position), the Lord evidently found an indirect way to intervene on behalf of Israel, through the elders who persuade Jephthah to lead the Israelites. Later His spirit descends upon him (Judg. 11:29). After Jephthah’s vow to God (even though it is not clear if it is because of the vow), God grants him victory over the Ammonites. Still, the Israelites receive precisely what they asked for so incautiously.⁴⁴ The judge they have chosen for themselves will save them “this day” (Judg. 10:15), just as they asked, but the Lord will not save them from the judge himself, who, after his victory over the Ammonites, will be dragged to a civil war and will massacre his own people (like Abimelech son of Gideon, who massacred his former allies). This recalls the idea, found in Hosea, concerning the Lord’s response to the people’s importuning that he give them a king: “I have given you kings in my anger, and I have taken them away in my wrath” (Hos. 13:11). The Lord indeed gives what He was asked to give, but no good will come to the people from this angry gift.⁴⁵

42. Roberts, “Content and Form,” 172.

43. “He grew impatient with/was vexed by (וּתְקַצֵּר נַפְשׁוֹ) the trouble/mischief (עֲמָל) of Israel” (11:16). Both key terms in the verse, וּתְקַצֵּר נַפְשׁוֹ and עֲמָל, are ambiguous. As for the former, in Num. 21:4 and Zech. 11:8 it clearly means “grow impatient.” But in Judg. 16:16, Samson’s “impatience” with Delilah’s nagging shades into the sense of annoyance or vexation. Similarly, עֲמָל may mean “toil” or “misery” (e.g., Deut. 26:7); but, in its frequent association with אָוֶן, the meaning is more like “mischief” or “villainy” (e.g., Ps. 10:7). Most scholars understand our verse to mean that the Lord grew impatient with the suffering of His people and decided to save them, despite His previous proclamation that He would no longer do so. On the other hand, Robert Polzin (*Moses and the Deuteronomist* [New York, 1980], 177–78) understands it to mean that the Lord “grew annoyed [or impatient] with the troubled efforts of Israel” and notes that, from such a negative statement, there can be no confidence that the Lord will deliver Israel. A similar point is made by Klein (*The Triumph of Irony*, 85). She adds that the idiom וּתְקַצֵּר נַפְשׁוֹ always has a negative sense in the Bible (as cited above). David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell (*Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* [Oxford, 1993], 113) point out two possible interpretations: “This can mean either that YHWH grew impatient with those who were troubling Israel or that YHWH grew impatient with the troubler Israel.” They show that if we read chapter 10 in the broader context of the book of Judges, with its repeating cycles of sin, punishment, appeals to the Lord, and deliverance, the second option is more likely. We can understand that the Lord finally grew impatient with the people’s repentance, which is always soon followed by backsliding. But if we focus on chapter 10 and read it as the beginning of the story, ignoring the broader context, it is hard to understand the Lord’s vexation with the people’s repentance, and accordingly we may tend to the first possibility and understand the statement as promising deliverance.

44. Perhaps we should compare their impatient and incautious request (Judg. 10:15) with Jephthah’s incautious vow (Judg. 11:30–31).

45. See, e.g., James L. Mays, *Hosea, OTL* (London, 1969), 178. The same pattern can be found in Numbers 11. The people lust for meat and complain. The Lord promises that he will give them meat for “a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wept before him, saying, ‘Why did we come forth out of Egypt?’”

Nor will the Lord save the judge from himself. He does not intervene to forestall the immoral act of sacrificing his daughter and the inevitable outcome—the extinction of his line. As Exum writes, “Jephthah’s victory, won against the backdrop of his failed negotiations, is Pyrrhic. The pinnacle of his career, his moment of greatest glory, contains the seeds of his tragedy, for Jephthah has vowed a sacrifice to YHWH, and victory demands its scandalous performance.”⁴⁶

Polzin has noted the similarity of the conflict between Israel and the Lord in Judg. 10:6–16 and that between the elders and Jephthah in 11:1–11. The Israelites betrayed the Lord just as the Gileadite elders betrayed Jephthah; later, in their distress, the Israelites turn to the Lord just as the elders turn to Jephthah, and pray for deliverance. The Lord in the one case, and Jephthah in the other, rebuke them for their past treatment and for coming only when they are in trouble. The Israelites in the one case, and the elders in the other, do not give up and make another attempt: the Israelites, by removing the idols and returning to the worship of the Lord; the elders, by agreeing to appoint Jephthah governor over all the residents of Gilead. This parallel casts an ironic light on the Israelites’ return to the Lord in chapter 10 and hints at its superficial nature. Just as the elders return to Jephthah only because of the pressure of the Ammonites and not because of sincere regret for their past treatment of him, so too the Israelites’ return to the Lord.⁴⁷ The parallel also casts Jephthah in a negative light. Whereas the Lord intervenes (if indirectly) on behalf of Israel because he can no longer bear their suffering, Jephthah intervenes only because of the personal benefit he will derive.⁴⁸ The Lord’s silence throughout the story, which Exum sees as the source of the tragic element in it,⁴⁹ is interwoven with its critical attitude toward Israel in general and toward the judge it has chosen in particular. With regard to Jephthah’s vow of a human sacrifice to the Lord if he is victorious, Klein aptly notes: “He may have been a devoted Yahwist, but—ironically to the reader—he includes aspects of heathen worship in his concept of Yahwism.”⁵⁰

I believe that Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter is compatible with the muddled religious consciousness of both individual Israelites and the entire nation as described in the appendices to the Book of Judges—the stories of Micah’s idol (chaps. 17–18) and of the concubine in Gibeah (chaps. 19–21). Scholars have noted that these chapters describe a state of anarchy, as the text declares explicitly: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6, 21:25; as well as the truncated formula in 18:1 and 19:1); they are replete with transgressions that attest to the degenerate state of the Israelite people.⁵¹ But we can say more than this: many of the transgressions described in these chapters indicate that it was, in fact, an intention to do what was pleasing to the Lord that led individual Israelites or the

(v. 20). In the end, however, He grows angry with the people and kills many of them while the meat is still between their teeth (v. 33).

46. Exum, *Tragedy*, 49.

47. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 178–79. Following him, see also Barry G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading*, JSOTSup 46 (Sheffield, 1987), 53–54; Roberts, “Content and Form,” 173–74.

48. Webb, *Judges*, 54.

49. Exum, *Tragedy*, 46, 49.

50. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 95; cf. David Janzen, “Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter?” *JSOT* 29 (2005), 339–57.

51. See, e.g., Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 120–21; Janzen, “Why the Deuteronomist.”

entire nation to absurd situations and the performance of religiously and morally unacceptable acts.⁵² Jephthah, who vows to offer a human sacrifice to the Lord, is perfectly at home in the picture painted by the appendices to Judges.⁵³

The tragedy of Jephthah—the extinction of his house—is highlighted. First of all, the story itself emphasizes that Jephthah’s victim is his only child (Judg. 11:34). Second, the immediate literary context emphasizes it; Jephthah’s story is surrounded by the brief account of the minor judges, some of whom are famous for their extensive progeny—sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. There is certainly a bitter irony in the fact that immediately before the story of Jephthah we read about Jair the Gileadite, with his 30 sons (10:4), while right after Jephthah’s death we read that the next judge was Ibzan of Bethlehem, who had 30 sons and 30 daughters and took 30 daughters-in-law for his sons (12:9). The list of minor judges concludes with Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite, who had 40 sons and 30 grandsons (v. 14).⁵⁴ Third, Jephthah’s barrenness is highlighted, as we have seen, by the parallels between his story and those of several characters in Genesis: Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, and Isaac. All of them are blessed with offspring, whereas Jephthah dies childless.

Another aspect highlighted by the parallels with the leading characters of Genesis is the fact that Jephthah is both victimizer and victim. The parallels between Jephthah and Abraham and Lot show him as a victimizer (but unlike Abraham, not at the divine behest; and unlike Lot, not with the goal of preserving the lives of his house guests) and illuminate his character in a negative light, for he brings his disaster on himself.⁵⁵ The comparisons of Jephthah with Ishmael and Isaac, on the other hand, reveal him as a victim and cast the character of the people of Israel (represented by the inhabitants of Gilead)—who are the victimizers in this case—in a negative light. Thus Jephthah and the people of Israel are shown to deserve each other, and the Lord’s silence indicates His displeasure with Israel, with the leader it chose, and with the entire sequence of events.

52. Some examples: In the story of Micah’s idol, Micah builds a private shrine adorned with forbidden ritual articles, whose origin is the silver he stole from his mother; Micah’s son serves as a priest even though he is not of the priestly lineage. When Micah meets up with the Levite lad, he appoints him as priest instead of his son and confidently trusts that, because of this, the Lord will help him prosper now (Judg. 17:13)—quite ignoring the fact that the lad is not suited to the post, neither with regard to his lineage nor his character. When the Danites come along, they steal Micah’s ritual objects and set up their own temple, whose ritual items are now twice-stolen (Micah from his mother and they from Micah). They also steal Micah’s “priest,” whom they persuade to betray his employer and join them, thereby upgrading his status to the priest of an entire tribe. In the story of the concubine in Gibeah, the Israelites take an oath at Mizpah not to marry their daughters to Benjaminites. In the wake of this binding oath, they must find questionable and immoral solutions, involving rape and murder, to solve the problem of the 600 surviving Benjaminite males who otherwise have no possibility of marrying.

53. See Janzen, “Why the Deuteronomist.” But Janzen sees the entire book of Judges as describing the decline of the people and does not focus on the appendices. Nor does he recognize that many of their transgressions are committed precisely out of a desire to serve the Lord, but that the religious practices of the people of that age reflect just how warped were their theological ideas. The same picture is evident at the end of the story of Gideon, with regard to the *ephod* that Gideon made for the Lord, but after which the Israelite played the harlot (Judg. 8:27).

54. Exum, *Tragedy*, 53.

55. On the character of Jephthah and readers’ complex attitude toward him—sympathy for the injustice done him, on the one hand, along with recognition of his negative traits as a person who exploits situations and individuals in pursuit of his own goals, on the other, see Roberts, “Content and Form,” 182–88, esp. 183.