

## Research Article

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# Whose Story? Which Sacrifice? On the Story of Jephthah's Daughter

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**Abstract:** The story of Jephthah and his daughter (Judg. 11:29–40) is a peculiar and problematic text. This article explores the question of the accountability for the sacrificial act with which the story culminates, and which provokes sharp disapproval in certain quarters, especially because of its gender bias. Applying the hermeneutical framework of René Girard and his distinction between sacrifice in Greek mythology (divinity in charge) and sacrifice in Judeo-Christian revelation (everyone responsible for his/her actions), I investigate the question: Is Jephthah's daughter a mute puppet in a drama staged by her tyrannical father, or perhaps fate, or is she rather a woman who is responsible for her own actions and accountable only to herself? The answer is twofold: she is a woman fully responsible for herself; however, the responsibility for her premature and violent death is shared by her father, herself, and the biblical author–redactor. After identifying Jephthah's daughter as a person responsible for her own actions, I aim to overcome the dialectic of “the text of terror” (post-structuralist interpretation) and the search for “herstory” (neoliberal interpretation). I suggest that in her powerlessness against patriarchal tyranny, Jephthah's daughter nonetheless exerts power and authority in condemning the existing power structures. Without approving any form of sacrifice, reading the story through a lens of powerful powerlessness can help us discern different forms of power and, ultimately, reject the aggression and violence that has dominated our world to this very day.

**Keywords:** sacrifice, Judges 11:29–40, gender, philosophical–theological interpretation, rhetoric analysis, Jephthah's daughter, Iphigenia in Aulis, Genesis 22

## 1 Introduction

Sacrifice is a popular theme in philosophical and theological discussions. The concept remains ambiguous, however, and the field is contested across anthropological, ethnological, sociological, and ethical perspectives. James Watt suggests that “every attempt to describe and explain ‘sacrifice’ always fails to encompass the whole range of ritual and nonritual behavior called sacrifice,”<sup>1</sup> and that, ultimately therefore, it would be best to abandon the “label” sacrifice altogether. After discussing many of the authors Watt lists as tackling the issue of sacrifice from their various points of interest – including Robertson Smith, Hubert and Mauss, Burkert<sup>2</sup> – I came to the same conclusion. However, what I have in mind when talking about sacrifice, and what Watt does not seem to discuss at all, is an interpretation of the individual's *experience* of sacrifice. Thus, contrary to all the various approaches taken by anthropologists, ethnologists, and scholars

<sup>1</sup> Watt, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, 174.

<sup>2</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*; Burkert, *Homo Necans*; Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*; Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*.

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of comparative religion, and many others who seek to interpret sacrifice as a social or socio-religious and cultic phenomenon, I aim to approach sacrifice from the existential–phenomenological angle, and in so doing I will draw from the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Jan Patočka, and Jacques Derrida.

The book of Judges is one of the most unusual books in the Hebrew Bible, and in few places is its eccentricity more evident than in the sacrificial story of Jephthah's daughter (Judg. 11:29–40). The many recent accounts testify that this sacrificial story is a scholarly focus for various reasons. In “Gender Difference and the Rabbis: Bat Yiftah as Human Sacrifice,” Tal Ilan suggests that behind the unnecessary death of the young woman might have been simply the pride and ignorance of Jephthah and the priest Phineas; Mikael Sjöberg's “Jephthah's Daughter as Object of Desire or Feminist Icon” depicts the violent and gendered aspects of the story against a background of two modern novels; and N. Scott Amos's article “Do to Me According to What Has Gone Out of Your Mouth” wrestles with medieval interpretations of the story to determine whether Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed or whether she entered into a life of dedication to the Lord.<sup>3</sup> These are but a few examples of the outstanding interest in the story of the female sacrifice of the unnamed daughter of Jephthah. However, there are perspectives that have especially influenced my own reading of the story of Jephthah's daughter, namely those of Esther Fuchs (“Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter”) and Phyllis Trible (*Rhetorics of Sexuality and Texts of Terror*). In leading a friendly polemic with these two great names in feminist biblical criticism, I will present a philosophical–theological interpretation of this “text of terror.” I will seek to overcome the powerful–powerless dichotomy by understanding the loaded label “power” in different terms and forms. I also aim to draw on the existing feminist criticism which seeks to empower Jephthah's daughter by recognising the excessive misogyny of the text as a woman's satire on men who play God (as per Adrienne Bledstein).

My hermeneutical framework for the story of Jephthah's daughter is the Girardian distinction between sacrifice in Greek mythology and sacrifice in Judeo-Christian revelation,<sup>4</sup> a distinction which opens the question of human accountability for the sacrificial act, which is seminal for my research. Only if we conclude, contrary to the deep-rooted conviction promoted by, for example, Kierkegaard<sup>5</sup> and some biblical scholars such as Thomas C. Römer,<sup>6</sup> that the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter is not a version of the Greek myth Iphigenia in Aulis but a Christian revelation in which individuals make their own choices will we be in a position to hold anyone accountable for the sacrifice: if the genre is not clearly defined, asking questions such as whom to blame for the result becomes somewhat problematic. First, I will compare my findings about Jephthah and his daughter with the accountability of Iphigenia and Agamemnon, similar characters in the parallel story of Iphigenia in Aulis from Greek mythology. Secondly, I will analyse Jephthah's (hasty) vow to God; thirdly, I will carry out a rhetorical analysis of the exchange between Jephthah and his daughter upon Jephthah's return from his victorious battle; finally, I will provide a philosophical–theological synthesis of the story against a background of the existential–phenomenological discourse on sacrifice. On the basis of these analyses, we will offer an answer to the following questions: Who is to be held accountable for the violent and immature death of Jephthah's daughter? Does the story tell us something about the power structures that continue to rule our society? Based on the story of Jephthah's daughter, can

<sup>3</sup> See also Koplowitz-Breier, “A Nameless Bride of Death.”

<sup>4</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, 220. A similar distinction is made by Mary Douglas in her pivotal contribution *Leviticus as Literature* when she discusses the concept of divination and its connection with sacrifice: “Divination was prominent in Egypt, Babylon, Greece; and Persia, but *Leviticus* [representative of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures] only mentions it halfway through the book, and only to condemn it.” Douglas, *Leviticus in Literature*, 110. Watt adds: “Once divination identified the supernatural source of a problem, sacrifice also provided a means for appropriating the relevant gods of driving away the afflicting demons. [...] Biblical writers, however, rejected sacrificial divination and beliefs in demons out of hand, having the ritual systems of sacrifice and purification largely without a theoretical justification.” Watt, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, 24. The term Judeo-Christian is problematic from the perspective of Judaism, which sees itself as unique and independent from Christianity. I use it only when referring directly to Girard's work. Elsewhere, I use “Christian” when referring to revelation and “Jewish and Christian” when referring to religions or the biblical text.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 54–67.

<sup>6</sup> Römer, “Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell...?”

we begin to distinguish between different forms of power which do not necessarily have to be aggressive and violent but may be powerful in their powerlessness?

## 2 The story of Jephthah's daughter from the perspective of the literary genre

Carolyn Pressler suggests that Judges narrates a downward spiral of social chaos in pre-monarchic Israel.<sup>7</sup> Clinton J. McCann observes that, "As the book of Judges proceeds, increasing injustice results in moral confusion and social chaos, a primary indication of which is the abuse of women."<sup>8</sup> Thomas C. Römer is convinced that the story of Jephthah's daughter as a "Jewish myth" was inserted to show that the ancient culture and literature of the Near East was of the same quality, drama, and poignancy as that of the Greeks.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that this issue is still debated, such a notion would have significant consequences for the feminist debate. Specifically, if the story of Jephthah's daughter is an ancient drama in which the fate of the characters is sealed by "divine council" rather than by one of the protagonists, no one can be held accountable for the sacrificial act. For even if the actors of the Greek myth attempt to revolt, their fate comes to them one way or another.

Bringing Girard and Kierkegaard to the feminist debate could be viewed as problematic as both are criticised by some for a perceived lack of interest in gender-specific issues. Some appreciate Girard's analytical search for the victim in primitive societies as a "hermeneutics of suspicion;" others call him sexist and patriarchal for his silence on the issue of the oppression of women.<sup>10</sup> On Kierkegaard, scholars are similarly split. Some, such as Alison Assister, observe that on occasion Kierkegaard writes as if he were a woman;<sup>11</sup> others, such as Wanda Warren Berry, accuse him of misogyny and male arrogance.<sup>12</sup> Whichever view one holds, their contribution to the topic cannot be ignored. Girard offers a helpful hermeneutical perspective by distinguishing between the sacrificial stories in Greek mythology<sup>13</sup> and those in Judeo-Christian revelation: where Greek mythology tells the story from the perspective of the one bringing the sacrifice, and where the victim is a ransom, Judeo-Christian revelation speaks from the perspective of the victim, who is the protégé of God.<sup>14</sup> Girard's distinction is important for our analysis for a different reason, however.<sup>15</sup> When we compare sacrificial narratives in the Hebrew Bible (such as the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:29–40, or the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22) with those in Greek mythology

<sup>7</sup> Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> McCann, *Judges*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Römer, "Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell...?"

<sup>10</sup> Nowak, "The Girardian Theory and Feminism;" see also Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, 297–307. One of Girard's severest critics is Toril Moi, who in "The Missing Mother" discusses the androcentrism Girard displays when exploring the paradigmatic novels of the Western canon in his first book *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*. It is fair to acknowledge, though, that Girard later confessed that failing to consider Virginia Woolf in his discussion was a grave error. Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, 298.

<sup>11</sup> Assister, "Kierkegaard, Battersby and Feminism."

<sup>12</sup> Berry, "Kierkegaard's Existential Dialectics."

<sup>13</sup> In her account of human sacrifice in Greek culture, Gabriele Weiler concludes that: "human sacrifice cannot directly be proven for the Greek world, but they were considered as real by the Greeks and influenced their life. [...] Human sacrifices [...] were at the most only rare exceptions." Weiler, "Human Sacrifice in Greek Culture," 56. Weiler nevertheless admits that "quite a number of human sacrifices, in the narrow and in the broader sense, are revealed by the Greek myths and their flexible adaptation in the fields of literature – especially of tragedies – as well as in the domains of art, particularly of vase-painting, plastic art of history painting." Ibid., 35.

<sup>14</sup> Girard, *Sacrifice*, 75, 77–8.

<sup>15</sup> A critical discussion of Girard's scapegoating mechanism may be found in my earlier article "Sacrifice and the Self;" or in Hagedorn's article "René Girard's Theory of Sacrifice" where Hagedorn problematises Girard's terminology and his rather selective use of particular examples from Greek mythology.

(Iphigenia in Aulis, for example),<sup>16</sup> we see that in the Greek myth, the characters cannot be held accountable for their actions because their fate is entirely in the hands of the gods and goddesses.<sup>17</sup> It is the gods and goddesses who are the omnipotent movers of all things and who lead their human champions as puppets through the “theatre of the world” in order to have their own interests served. By contrast, in the Bible the characters decide for themselves and are therefore responsible for the outcome of their own actions. There are significant differences between the stories in Judges 11 and Genesis 22, however. Abraham is ordered to sacrifice Isaac; Jephthah acts alone. We are told Isaac’s name; Jephthah’s daughter remains anonymous. Isaac plays almost no part in the dialogue; Jephthah’s daughter has something to say about her destiny. Isaac is spared; Jephthah’s daughter is not. Regarding the motive for the sacrifice, it is more appropriate to contrast Abraham with Agamemnon, the tragic hero from the sacrificial story of Iphigenia in Aulis, than with Jephthah. Abraham and Agamemnon are both given a divine order to commit pedicide. However, there is no explicit threat towards Abraham if he does not fulfil God’s order. Agamemnon, on the other hand, was informed that his fleet could not sail back to Greece if he refused to sacrifice Iphigenia. Isaac, moreover, is ultimately spared, so although the motive for the sacrifice comes from the realm of myth, the outcome does not. In her account of sacrifice and its legacy in the history of the Jewish nation, Yael S. Feldman concludes that viewed through the lens of typical gender stereotypes Isaac’s passivity corresponds to the female principle whereas the active role taken by Jephthah’s daughter accords rather with the male principle.<sup>18</sup>

Kierkegaard offers yet another perspective on the different worlds of Greek myth on the one hand and Jewish and Christian religions on the other when he distinguishes between the knight of faith (Abraham) and the tragic hero much loved of the Greeks (Jephthah, Agamemnon). In Kierkegaard’s understanding, Abraham is a single individual whose intention (telos) to sacrifice overcomes the ethical (not to sacrifice). The tragic hero on the other hand, despite the term, is not a single and detached individual but is always part of the universal, which in this case equates the ethical. The sacrifice of the tragic hero serves the universal (family, kin, nation, home land etc.) by re-establishing the unity of the hero and the universal; by making peace.<sup>19</sup> The sacrifice of the knight of faith is a paradoxical act of faith which has no connection to the universal.<sup>20</sup> Abraham as a knight of faith is called to sacrifice against the logic of the peace-making act, that is, against the sacrifice of the tragic hero. His sacrifice, on the contrary, had it come to that end, would work against Abraham’s family and implicitly against the nation which according to promises such as that in Gen 12:7<sup>21</sup> was to originate in him and go on to inherit the land. The deity of the tragic hero (Agamemnon) is not personal in the Jewish and Christian sense: the goddess Artemis, although she is indeed a person,

<sup>16</sup> There are many different versions of the account of the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Weiler argues that older versions replace Iphigenia with an animal; Euripides favours the sacrifice of a virgin. In some versions, Iphigenia is killed, in some she is saved and transferred to Artemis’s shrine to serve her there. According to Weiler, the sacrifice of Iphigenia should be interpreted as the sacrifice of expiation: “A man or a woman violates consciously or unconsciously divine rules or insults the divinity who demands as a punishment a special form of reparation, i.e. the sacrifice of a person close to the perpetrator, mostly a relative.” Weiler, “Human Sacrifice in Greek Culture,” 40.

<sup>17</sup> Although Greek mythology presents different gods and goddesses with different competences and agendas and distinct cultic places who are thought of as persons and who are served as persons at their shrines, their relationship to humans and the relationship of humans to them may not, nevertheless, be understood as *personal* in the same sense as it is in the Christian faith.

<sup>18</sup> Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> See also: “The function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and prevent conflicts from erupting.” Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 15. See also Patočka’s understanding of non-authentic sacrifice in Patočka, “The Dangers of Technicization in Science,” 13–22. This exposition of sacrifice sets in opposition the non-authentic sacrifice which functions within the realm of exchange (in other words, I lose something in order to gain something superior) and the so-called authentic sacrifice where I lose everything (my life) to gain *nothing* in particular: “In this way, sacrifice acquires a remarkably radical and paradoxical form. It is not a sacrifice for something or someone, even though in a certain sense it is a sacrifice for everything and for all. In a certain sense, it is a sacrifice for nothing, if thereby we mean that which is not existing in particular.” Patočka, “The Dangers of Technicization in Science,” 22. According to Patočka, non-authentic sacrifice has a peace-making potential and effect, whereas authentic sacrifice, like the near sacrifice of Isaac, leads to paradox, misapprehension, and shock.

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 57–61.

<sup>21</sup> Gen 12:7 is listed as the first (not unique) reference.

does not relate to Agamemnon personally. As a representative of the deity, Artemis does not, unlike the Jewish and Christian deity, stay above but is a part of the universal principle which abides by the ethical.<sup>22</sup> According to Kierkegaard, the sacrifices of Agamemnon and Jephthah are accepted and understood by the original witnesses and later readers. There is a generally intelligible reason why Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter, in that if he did not do so the Greek fleet could not sail back home. By the same reasoning, Abraham's sacrifice is less intelligible as there was no threat if he refused to execute it.

Agamemnon and Jephthah are, moreover, relieved of their sorrow and receive consolation. Abraham, however, will always remain alone with his grief and terror (even though his sacrifice was not executed). Kierkegaard explains:

The tragic hero finishes his task at a specific moment in time, but as time passes, he does what is no less significant: he visits the person encompassed by sorrow, who cannot breathe because of his anguished sighs, whose thoughts oppress him, heavy with tears. He appears to him, breaks the witchcraft of sorrow, loosens the bonds, evokes the tears, and the suffering one forgets his own sufferings in those of the tragic hero.<sup>23</sup>

Kierkegaard's fascinating exposition clarifies the distinction between Christian revelation and Greek myth and recalls the close connection between Abraham, Jephthah, and Agamemnon. However, there are two significant differences between these figures, differences which Kierkegaard overlooks but which are particularly important for this study. The first regards the motivation behind the sacrifice. Whereas the sacrifice of Iphigenia was requested by the goddess Artemis under the threat of preventing Agamemnon's fleet from sailing back to Athens, Jephthah offers his daughter to God himself (although unknowingly) and for no obvious reason since the Spirit of the Lord came upon him before he made his vow. The deity (Yhwh) did not oppose Jephthah's mission against the Ammonites. On the contrary, the Spirit of the Lord was already with Jephthah before he made his vow (although he might not have known it). In any case, the deity created no obstacles for Jephthah's mission and did not ask for a sacrifice. The second difference regards the public reception of the sacrifice. Kierkegaard insists that both Jephthah and his daughter were understood and admired by those who witnessed the event, but reception history disagrees, certainly in Jephthah's case. Jephthah meets his end soon after the sacrificial event, but not before winning one last battle against the Ephraimites. His six-year rule was marked by continuous intertribal dissension in Israel, and his name is not recalled in the Jewish and Christian scripture except in 1 Samuel 12:9–11 and Hebrews 11:32–38, where he is listed among those who once served Israel; the Jewish tradition disapproves of his act altogether.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, however, it is the daughter's response that does not fit the sacrifice of the tragic hero in the Kierkegaardian sense because her words may be interpreted as disapproval of her sacrifice. The daughter responds to her father's accusatory greeting with the words, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth" (Judges 11:36b–c). It is possible to interpret this as taking over her father's sorrow (as Kierkegaard might have it), or as submitting to her father's tyranny (Fuchs),<sup>25</sup> but I will argue that what the daughter is doing is blaming her father for his foolishness.

In the Girardian system, it is crucial that the victim is proclaimed "guilty." The sacrifice is inevitable for the "greater good," for the sake of the community.<sup>26</sup> Iphigenia is a prime example, and she even goes one

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 58, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 61. Also: "When the valiant judge who in the hour of need saved Israel binds God and himself in one breath by the same promise, he will heroically transform the young maiden's jubilation, the beloved daughter's joy to sorrow, and all Israel will sorrow with her over her virginal youth. But every freeborn man will understand, every resolute woman will admire Jephthah, and every virgin in Israel will wish to behave as his daughter did." Ibid. 58.

<sup>24</sup> A comprehensive overview of instances from the Talmud and other midrashim where the Rabbis blame Jephthah and the priest of Mizpah for not knowing the Torah and therefore not redeeming Jephthah's daughter from the forthcoming sacrifice is offered by Tal Ilan, "Gender Difference and the Rabbis," 175–90.

<sup>25</sup> Fuchs, "Marginalization," 125–31.

<sup>26</sup> Girard, *Sacrifice*, 75.

step further when acknowledging the need for her sacrifice. After she has become used to the idea of her own death, she proclaims:

Greece, the greatest of cities, is now looking upon me, and there rests in me both the passage of the ships and the destruction of Troy, and, for the women hereafter, if the barbarians do them aught of harm, to allow them no longer to carry them off from prosperous Greece, having avenged the destruction of Helen, whom Paris bore away. All these things I dying shall redeem, and my renown, for that I have freed Greece, will be blessed.<sup>27</sup>

Iphigenia presents herself as the heroine whose sacrifice saves the whole of Greece. Jephthah's daughter's answer to her father, "Do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth," offers an entirely different impression. Hers is hardly the victorious statement of someone who sees herself as the saviour of all Israel. Indeed, therefore, the role of sacrifice in the story of Jephthah's daughter is different in this respect from the story of Iphigenia.

### 3 The arrogant and hasty vow

Phyllis Tribble argues that the vow made by Jephthah was a sign of his unfaithfulness and arrogance, and that it was a vow made in haste. She blames Jephthah for his doubting and his demands for further affirmation of God's favour: "Jephthah himself does not evince the assurance that the spirit of Yahweh ought to give. Rather than acting with conviction and courage, he responds with doubt and demand."<sup>28</sup> She also stresses that neither God nor the people of Gilead demanded this vow, and that it breaks into the narrative[...]

[...]at the very center to press for divine help that ironically is already Jephthah's through the spirit of Yahweh. The making of the vow is an act of unfaithfulness. Jephthah desires to bind God rather than embrace the gift of the spirit. What comes to him freely, he seeks to earn and manipulate. The meaning of his words is doubt, not faith, it is control, not courage. To such a vow the deity makes no reply.<sup>29</sup>

Tribble's interpretation assumes that Jephthah knew the Spirit of the Lord was with him. This is indeed a logical assumption, especially given the intertextual reading of stories within the book of Judges, such as Judges 3:10; 6:34; 14:6; 15:14 and elsewhere, where the Spirit of the Lord comes upon the person who becomes a Judge or performs a powerful deed. However, because Jephthah did not do anything extraordinary immediately after the Spirit of the Lord came upon him – he simply set off for the battlefield some distance away<sup>30</sup> – one could argue that he might not have known that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. Moreover, the text itself sheds no light on this matter. To suggest that he did know is pure speculation. In his commentary on Judges, Roger Ryan furthermore suggests that Jephthah's daughter knew of her father's vow,<sup>31</sup> but this is equally speculative. From the account of the "omniscient narrator," the implied reader may well assume that Jephthah knew that the Spirit of the Lord was with him and that despite this made his vow, albeit in haste and arrogance; equally, the reader may assume that Jephthah's daughter knew nothing of the vow even though she knew her father was coming and could have known all the same what news he was bringing, that is, that she was to be sacrificed. Nevertheless, Fuchs asserts that, "The only one who is unaware of the ironic incongruity between appearance and 'reality' is the daughter. Greeting her father with dance the daughter is presented as a victim of dramatic irony; she does not know the gruesome meaning of her joyful actions."<sup>32</sup> Unwittingly, Fuchs makes Jephthah's daughter even more the unknowing fool than

<sup>27</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Tribble, "The Daughter of Jephthah," 96.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>30</sup> See Judges 11:29.

<sup>31</sup> Ryan, *Judges*, 86–8.

<sup>32</sup> Fuchs, "Marginalization," 120.



was probably intended by the biblical author–redactor. Moreover, she blames Jephthah’s daughter for her fate: “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.”<sup>33</sup> Although Fuchs’s criticism of the story of Jephthah’s daughter is clearly aimed at empowering the daughter by allowing her some sort of agency (going out to greet her father), Fuchs appears to put her down even more by assuming that she should have stayed at home when her father did not instruct her to go out. We do not know if Jephthah was aware that the Spirit was with him, or if his daughter knew about the vow. Casting doubt on the daughter’s ignorance of the vow, Ryan contends that a vow to God (or the gods) was a public statement performed before a wide audience so the daughter would certainly have known about it, but that armed with this knowledge she nonetheless willingly offered herself as a sacrificial victim.<sup>34</sup> Although this appears to be a ground-breaking theory, Ryan offers no suggestion as to why the daughter might have done what she did. One plausible explanation is that the biblical author–redactor “sacrificed” Jephthah’s daughter in order to emphasise the extent of Jephthah’s guilt without suggesting that his daughter was a mute puppet – on the contrary, that it was her who convicted him.

Adriane Bledstein offers a highly distinctive approach to interpreting the book of Judges. Bledstein believes the book to have been written around the year 600 BCE by a woman, the prophetess Huldah, a member of the court of King Josiah II, with a view to satirising and censuring men:

The standard of faith is embodied by three extraordinary women – Deborah, Jael and Jephthah’s daughter. This standard combined with the low status of women, epitomized by the gang rape of the Levite’s concubine (Judg. 19), supports the possibility of a woman storyteller satirizing humans who play God.<sup>35</sup>

Bledstein works with the idea that the competence of women in Judges is contrasted with the absolute incompetence of their male counterparts. She invites us, therefore, to think about the book of Judges as a satire rather than a display of chauvinism and to understand the over-egged misogyny as a clue to this. Two examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the story of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4. Deborah sends Barak to lead the Israelite troops into battle against the Canaanites, but instead of going to the battle straight away, Barak demands that Deborah join him in the battle even though she has already assured him of divine assistance:

“The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands’.” [...] Barak said to her, “*If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.*” And she said, “*I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.*”<sup>36</sup>

A paraphrase of Deborah’s response might read: “Fine, I will lead you by the hand, even though you have ten thousand men with you, but all the fame will be mine and the people of Israel will laugh at you.” The Lord will indeed give the Canaanites into the hand of a woman, or in fact women. The first victory over the Canaanites belongs to Deborah, the prophetess forced into battle with Barak because he would not go otherwise. The other victory belongs to Jael, the “amazon” and helper of the Israeli troops who set a trap for the Canaanite commander Sisera and killed him while he slept. Deborah and Jael exemplify the female bravery which contrasts with Barak’s lack of faith and his extorting of Deborah’s “blessing” on and presence in his campaign. One way to understand this narrative can, therefore, be as a “woman’s satire on men who play god,” an attempt to expose through irony the gender inequality that some scholars insist did not exist in pre-monarchic Israel.<sup>37</sup> Bledstein’s unique approach contrasts sharply with the conviction

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>34</sup> Ryan, *Judges*, 88–9.

<sup>35</sup> Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire...?” 53.

<sup>36</sup> Judges 4:6b–9c NRSV. Italics mine.

<sup>37</sup> McCann, *Judges*, 6; see also Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire...?” 53.

that the book of Judges is a faithful account of ancient Near Eastern chauvinism when it could in fact be an attempt to provide a social corrective to the deviation from the desired gender equality: “Disasters in Judges are linked to Israelites forgetting YHWH, to conflicts with hostile neighbours, and to Israelite men who play God. Symptomatic of the latter are men who disregard the humanity of women.”<sup>38</sup>

## 4 The rhetoric of female submission

Athalya Brenner points out the remarkable presence of women in the book of Judges, although they are often depicted androcentrically. Nineteen female characters grace the book, but only four are honoured with a proper name – Achsah, Deborah, Jael, and Delilah; the others remain nameless and defined by their affiliation to men. Brenner suggests that, “If we recognize the validity of this principle insofar as the literary presentation of male figurations are [sic] concerned, the namelessness of most female figurations in Judges becomes quite meaningful.”<sup>39</sup> Most of the women, furthermore, are foreigners and so doubly alienated. This female outsider arouses fear of the feminine “Other” (in the sense of the feminine deity), which is not officially recognised in the Hebrew religion. Cheryl Exum suggests that the biblical author–redactor leaves Jephthah’s daughter nameless in order to emphasise not her as a person, but her deed, specifically her sacrifice. She is to remain anonymous and as alien to us as possible in order not to arouse any sympathy from us:<sup>40</sup> “Herein lies [...] the reason Jephthah’s daughter’s name is not preserved: because she is commemorated not for herself but as a daughter.”<sup>41</sup> Esther Fuchs neatly captures the line of thinking that explains why Jephthah’s daughter is described as a submissive victim of patriarchal tyranny:

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 [...]. This scenario would have cast Jephthah in the role of a heartless villain and elicit too much sympathy for the daughter.<sup>42</sup>

There is little problem in agreeing that the daughter is silenced and marginalised, but we should also be interested in the author–redactor’s motivation for such marginalisation. Gaps in the text offer an invitation for the reader to respond. We are given no personal information about Jephthah’s daughter and are therefore invited to seek such details from the traces left within the text. It is possible to read the text in the way that appears expected of us, namely, to interpret the notable silence regarding Jephthah’s daughter as the author–redactor’s desire to promote her role as an archetypal submissive female-daughter. Or we can proceed with caution, or even suspicion. The excessive marginalisation of Jephthah’s daughter could be interpreted as the author’s attempt to direct the reader’s attention to her. Similarly, we may detect the literary device of deliberately overstating the dominance of men over women in order to emphasise the foolishness of the kind of patriarchy in which, as Bledstein puts it, “men play God.”<sup>43</sup> Fuchs suggests that, “Literary strategies [in the book of Judges] work [...] in the interests of patriarchal ideology, the ideology of male supremacy.”<sup>44</sup> She further points out that the Hebrew word שׁוּב (to return; but also to convert) is a key feature of the rhetoric in the dialogue between father and daughter: “Jephthah’s daughter is said to ‘return’ to her father and because the father cannot ‘return from his vow’ [v. 35], namely revoke it, his daughter must ‘return’ [v. 39] to him.”<sup>45</sup> This is indeed an interesting observation, as the verb שׁוּב is also used in

<sup>38</sup> Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire...?” 54.

<sup>39</sup> Brenner, “Introduction,” 11.

<sup>40</sup> Exum, “On Judges 11,” 139.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>42</sup> Fuchs, “Marginalization,” 126.

<sup>43</sup> Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire...?”

<sup>44</sup> Fuchs, “Marginalization,” 130.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.



religious-cultic language, where it designates conversion to a deity. However, Fuchs continues: “The parallel between ‘do to me’[...] framing the father–daughter relationship and ‘did to you’[...] 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.”<sup>46</sup> Through a lens of female submission to male tyranny, we could offer the view that the implied author is suggesting that Jephthah’s daughter is deifying her tyrannical father; thus Lion Feuchtwanger in his novel *Jephthah and His Daughter* (1958).<sup>47</sup> Another possibility is that the daughter is satirising her father’s “playing God.” Contrary to Fuchs, Bledstein is persuaded that the exaggerated silencing and marginalising of the daughter is intended to prove Jephthah ridiculous and underline the ironic undertones of the story. Humour, of course, is a matter of taste. And if the story of Jephthah’s daughter, which ends in the murder of an innocent young woman, is to be understood as satirical or humorous, it is black humour indeed. One can nonetheless admit a certain level of irony in a story about an illegitimate son, cast out of his home, who is appointed leader of the armies of Gilead and on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, who loses his only and beloved child as a result of a hasty vow to his God. It is a sad irony, though, and one that might have been constructed to satirise the patriarchal structures of pre-monarchic Israel.

Fuchs is persuaded that the words “[...] do to me according to [...]” and the absence of the daughter’s proper name are proof of her submissive nature and of the father’s dominance over her.<sup>48</sup> Exum states: “In encouraging her father to fulfil his vow, she subordinates her life to the communal good. The seriousness of the vow is upheld, the need to sacrifice satisfied, and paternal authority goes unchallenged.”<sup>49</sup> However, if we take a close look at the dialogue between Jephthah and his daughter, we will see that the opposite could be true. Jephthah opens his speech by accusing his daughter: “You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me” (Judges 11:35c–d). She responds: “My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth” (Judges 11:36b–c). Two things here contradict the idea that Jephthah’s daughter is a victim of patriarchal tyranny. First, judging from her response to her father, without apparently knowing the content of the vow and without seeking to familiarise herself with it there and then, Jephthah’s daughter seems to know exactly what is going to happen to her as if she knew the content of the vow. Secondly, the daughter’s choice of words, especially the repetition of “you” and “yours” (“you have opened your mouth,” “[you] do to me according to what has come out of your mouth,” “the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies”), suggests that she is in fact accusing him. I maintain that this one sentence with so much emphasis on the pronoun “you” (even though the “enemies” recalled by the daughter were undoubtedly the enemies of all Gilead and not just of Jephthah) suggests that rather than submitting to her father, Jephthah’s daughter is in fact laying upon him full responsibility for both their fates.<sup>50</sup>

Jephthah’s move may well be understood within the realm of the patriarchal power structure and the powerful/powerless dialectic. However, the daughter’s response breaks the structure. She is openly powerless in facing the powerful but refuses to accept responsibility for her father’s vow and hands it back to him. Similarly, in his interpretation of the binding of Isaac in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, Simon Podmore suggests a similar untangling of tyrannical power by powerlessness:

In the radically Lutheran terms, Abraham “overcomes God by his powerlessness,” expressing faith’s secret and the link between sacrifice and silence through the word that “God will provide for himself.”[...] Abraham concedes that he will not

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>47</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Jephthah and His Daughter*.

<sup>48</sup> Fuchs, “Marginalization,” 125.

<sup>49</sup> Exum, “On Judges 11,” 137.

<sup>50</sup> The emphasis on “you/yours” is deep-rooted rhetorical praxis for making the other person responsible for an adverse situation and is used elsewhere in the Bible. One of the best-known examples is in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: “But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes[...]” (Luke 15:30). The prodigal son was of course no less a brother of the speaker than he was a son of the father. The rhetorical construction is not random but constructed so as to blame the father for his conduct towards the younger, “prodigal” son.

oppose God but will instead, like Job, embrace powerlessness in the face of his ordeal [Prøvelse], placing his faith in the unchanging love of God.<sup>51</sup>

Like Jacques Derrida, who suggests that there are two sacrifices in the binding of Isaac – Isaac’s and Abraham’s<sup>52</sup> – Podmore proposes that there are even more sacrifices going on but he is interested in the sacrifice of Abraham.<sup>53</sup> This has a significant meaning because, Derrida argues, from Abraham’s perspective, he had already sacrificed Isaac when he decided to do it.<sup>54</sup> Podmore argues that by stating that “God will provide for himself,” Abraham is, like Jephthah’s daughter, returning responsibility to where it belongs, namely, in his case, with God who asked for it. Ronald Krebs argues in a similar vein: “Power structures are most certainly skewed when it comes to God and man, and overt resistance is impossible when God issues a direct command. [...] Adopting a posture of stoical silence is what the powerless have learned to do [...].”<sup>55</sup> Thus, it seems that even means that are typically considered a sign of submission – Jephthah’s daughter’s “do to me according to [...],” or Abraham’s long silence followed by his ostensibly evasive “God will provide for himself” – can become features of resistance when one is so obviously powerless in the face of the powerful. Derrida’s account of this matter is far from clear. He observes: “He [Abraham] will not decide *not to* [sacrifice], he has *decided to* [sacrifice], but he would *prefer not to* [if God stopped him].”<sup>56</sup> Sarah Coakley turns her attention from the sacrifice of Abraham to the sacrifice of Isaac: “Isaac, in short, is the type of the one who triumphs over human powerlessness, not by a false, compensatory will-to-power and further patriarchal violence, but through the subtler power of a transformative, divine *interruption*.”<sup>57</sup> We can understand Coakley’s argument best in light of Podmore’s conclusion that Abraham returns the responsibility for the sacrifice to God. By stepping back from the stage and leaving the powerless Isaac to face an omnipotent God, Abraham made space for God to reconsider the divine plan – in Coakley’s words, for “divine interruption.” The story of Jephthah’s daughter is different because the command to sacrifice did not come from God. Unlike Abraham, Jephthah could not hand responsibility over to anyone because it was his from the beginning. Thus, when he wanted to give it up, he could only forward it onto his innocent daughter. Even though the daughter refuses this responsibility and through her speech sends it back where it came from, she remains alone in facing her human father and not, like Isaac, God. Comparing the two sacrificial stories, one could conclude that when facing human powerlessness and vulnerability, it may be easier to interrupt the divine rather than the human patriarchy.

Coakley argues further that Isaac bears characteristics of femininity, which is received and further developed in fine art and iconography. Even though this argument works well from the perspective of the reception history of this narrative,<sup>58</sup> I do not share Coakley’s conviction that Isaac is in fact a feminine character, and fear that appealing to interpretations in art or elsewhere which underline gender stereotypes is dangerous. I would argue that the distinction between the near sacrifice of Isaac, where Abraham and Isaac really “overcame God by their powerlessness,” and the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, which meant the end of this young woman, remains an atrocity and must not be lost in philosophical–theological interpretations. Jephthah’s daughter might have overcome her father by her powerlessness in the face of a patriarchal society, but she did not gain her life.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Podmore, “The Sacrifice of Silence,” 90.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Podmore, “The Sacrifice of Silence,” 74.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 72.

<sup>55</sup> Krebs, “The Binding of Isaac and the Arts of Resistance,” 139.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 75. Italics in the original.

<sup>57</sup> Coakley, “In Defense of Sacrifice,” 18. Italics in the original.

<sup>58</sup> See Doerfler, “Echoes of the Akedah,” 103–7.

<sup>59</sup> Patočka gives an example of the powerless conquering the powerful in the case of the Russian political detainee Andrei Sakharov: “You see this in Sakharov: regardless of what the prosecutor says, he does not back down. On the contrary: the more they threaten him, the more he has the upper hand; the threats are a stimulus for him. There is a peculiar dialectic in that. Those who threaten him are condemned not to understand him – at least in a particular situation, which need not last long. They are led to intensify the impact of what he has done. To intensify the breathtaking impression that something here reigns over that which regards itself as force, power etc. And what is that reigns over? It is no thing at all!” Patočka, “Čtyři semináře k problému Evropy,” 421.

I believe that, like Abraham's silence towards God who asks for his son and Isaac's silence towards his father, the powerlessness of Jephthah's daughter in the face of patriarchal tyranny should be interpreted not as submissiveness but as powerful powerlessness, or, to use Coakley's term, power in vulnerability.<sup>60</sup> Even though when comparing the gender aspects of Judges and Genesis Tal Ilan rightly points out that "bad things don't just happen in Judges where they did not happen in Genesis. They also happen to women and not men,"<sup>61</sup> powerful powerlessness does not in the broader picture appear to be gendered. Saying that, one cannot ignore that it is mostly women who are portrayed as powerless in a world dominated by men.

Thus, unlike Iphigenia's victorious speech, in which she understands her sacrifice and is proud of it, Jephthah's daughter's response, I conclude, can hardly be understood as her acceptance of sacrifice.<sup>62</sup> It is rather an open pronouncement of her father's solo act which brings nothing positive, whether to Jephthah (the deity has already approved his mission), or to the community (victory in battle was secured by the Spirit of the Lord resting upon Jephthah, not by the vow), or to the daughter (although she is commemorated by the virgins of Israel she might rather have chosen not to die). The narrative and characters in the story of Jephthah's daughter are similar to those in Iphigenia in Aulis, but many important differences remain, one of them being the responsibility for the sacrificial act. The dialogue in Judges could have been brilliantly and intentionally constructed by the author to suggest that Jephthah's daughter was fighting back. This is not to suggest that the story is not a "text of terror." One line of interpretation certainly allows for that, but there is another that makes it possible to claim (with Bledstein) that this is a "woman's satire on men who play God." Most plausibly, however, it is both: it is a "text of terror" and a "woman's satire," depending on who is reading the text, which lens they are reading it through, and what agenda they are bringing to the text. Thus, without passing over the potential danger of the text, I suggest overcoming this dialectical reading of the story of Jephthah's daughter and thereby making the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter a story worth reading even today.

## 5 Concluding remarks

The sacrificial story of Jephthah's daughter is just one among many challenging stories in the Hebrew Bible. It is problematic for many reasons, among which the most disturbing is probably its account of an instance of pedicide, intensified by gender bias. There are other problems though, such as Jephthah's "lack of faith," which resulted in the fateful and wretched vow that is condemned by most feminist biblical critics, Trible included. The legitimacy of a hasty condemnation of Jephthah's vow is immediately called into question, however, by other instances within the book of Judges where a lack of faith receives no such condemnation, such as with Barack, whose faithless demands of Deborah cost him nothing but a loss of his personal glory. The most interesting issue, however, and the one that appears most promising for further investigation, is that of accountability: whom to blame and for what. This is a timeless issue, and one which can be applied in a variety of contexts. Looking at the story of Jephthah's daughter from the perspective of the personal accountability of the characters and their respective abilities to intervene and move the narrative on gives us ample reason to continue our engagement with the narrative. For example, Jephthah and his daughter are not the only people who must be held to account – there is also the author–redactor. What if it is not the tyrannical father but the author who decided to commit the "literary murder" of Jephthah's daughter? If the daughter had not died, the comparison with the binding of Isaac would certainly be less provocative and

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<sup>60</sup> My own approach differs from Coakley's precisely because I do not see the gender-specific character of powerful powerlessness (as my examples demonstrate) and because although I admit that the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter may help to unveil the oppressive power structures in our society, I do not by any means see anything positive in sacrifice. See also Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self* and *Powers and Submissions*.

<sup>61</sup> Ilan, "Gender Difference and the Rabbis," 176.

<sup>62</sup> Römer argues, contrary to my suggestion and in line with his own theory, that Jephthah's daughter's response corresponds to the submissive response of Iphigenia. Römer, "Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell...?" 34–7.

controversial. From a purely literary point of view, we could say that Jephthah's daughter offers the author the opportunity to stage a "woman's satire on men who play God." However, if we consider Jephthah's daughter to be a real person, we must conclude that her story is indeed a "text of terror."

In revealing the author's intentions to commit the literary murder of Jephthah's daughter and so prove her father culpable, we should be wary of committing the same crime. Jephthah's daughter must be reckoned with as a person. The author created the daughter not as a mute puppet but as an independent woman with her own mind. Numerous aspects of the daughter's story – the notable absence of her proper name, the nature of her exchange with her father, the fact that she was ultimately sacrificed, and the later tradition of the "daughters of Israel" to lament her death – suggest that she was not a passive victim, an object of male tyranny, but indeed the heroine of a woman's satire. Yes, she too was sacrificed, but her conduct interrupted the order of a male-dominated society. Where Exum suggests that the daughter was submitting to a system based on sacrificial relationships, I suggest, quite to the contrary, that by her powerlessness in facing patriarchal tyranny, she witnessed against the existing violent power structure. Such power, modest yet beseeching, can easily be overlooked, as it functions in a different realm from the power we are used to seeing at work in the structures of a male-dominated system. In this respect, reading such a gender biased text of terror may help us to be attentive to similar phenomena in our own context and to make a decisive stand against them.

My approach could be deemed complementary to the poststructuralist and neoliberal approaches usefully described and distinguished by Esther Fuchs in her crucial contribution "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women" published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* in 2008. My aim has been to unveil the secret motivations of Jephthah and his daughter and to explore how their respective responses to the sacrificial event to come betrays the nature of their relationship. One could perhaps think that by undertaking such an intellectual enterprise I am advocating female sacrifice, or any sacrifice for that matter. On the contrary, I am seeking to decipher signs of *difference* from the established male norm in the rhetoric and the acts of Jephthah's daughter which demand our attention and call for a refutation of the sacrifice of *any other*. Thus, I am indeed looking for the "herstory" (to borrow Fuchs's term) in order to give voice to the unnamed daughter of Jephthah, who was beyond any shadow of doubt marginalised and silenced. However, in doing this I am not looking to introduce a heroine who will destabilise the power structure by acting as a counter pole to the existing order. Such a heroine would simply succeed in maintaining the *status quo*. Rather, I am seeking to demonstrate that there are different forms of power, and that the aggressive form, the form we are called either to mimic or to submit to, must no longer conquer interhuman relations. The power I am looking to present in this article is represented by a woman – the unnamed daughter of Jephthah – but it is not specific to women. It is common to everybody who says no to the oppressive order which to this day constitutes our Western society.

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