

**Jephthah's Daughter**  
**in the Jewish Exegetical Tradition**

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July 1993

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of **Master of Arts** (c) Deborah Abecassis 1993

## **Abstract**

The biblical narrative of Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11:31-40) recounts the story of the judge, Jephthah, who vowed to sacrifice to God whatever came to greet him upon his return from a victorious battle with Ammon, and whose daughter became the victim of this vow. The goal of this thesis is to examine a sample of the Jewish responses to this biblical narrative from ancient and medieval times through the twentieth century. The analysis demonstrates the difficult nature of this text, its linguistic and conceptual ambiguities, the solutions to a well-defined series of problems proposed by more than two dozen interpreters, and their failure to deal with most of the historical and ethical problems that emerge from the story.

Le récit biblique de Jephthah et de sa fille (Juges 11:31-39) raconte l'histoire du juge, Jephthah, qui a fait un vœu de sacrifier à Dieu quoi que soit qui vienne le saluer de son retour d'une bataille victorieuse contre Ammon, et dont sa fille est devenue victime de ce vœu. Le but de cette thèse est d'examiner un échantillon des réponses juives à ce récit biblique depuis les époques anciennes et médiévales jusqu'au vingtième siècle. L'analyse démontre le caractère difficile de ce texte, ses ambiguïtés linguistiques et de conception, les solutions d'une série de problèmes bien-définie, présentées par plus de deux douzaines d'interprètes, et leur échec à traiter la plus part des problèmes éthiques et historiques qui émergent de cette histoire.

# Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgments                           | i  |
| Introduction                              | 1  |
| Chapter One - The Biblical Story          | 5  |
| Chapter Two - The Problems                | 9  |
| Textual Problems                          | 9  |
| Jephthah's Vow                            | 9  |
| Jephthah's Return from the War with Ammon | 11 |
| The Exchange between Father and Daughter  | 12 |
| The Epilogue                              | 14 |
| Conceptual Problems                       | 15 |
| Chapter Three - Ancient Texts             | 18 |
| The Bible                                 | 18 |
| The Versions                              | 20 |
| The Septuagint                            | 20 |
| Targum Jonathan                           | 22 |
| The Peshitta                              | 24 |
| Pseudo-Philo                              | 26 |
| Josephus                                  | 33 |
| Chapter Four - Early Rabbinic Literature  | 36 |
| The Babylonian Talmud                     | 36 |
| Midrashim                                 | 39 |
| Genesis Rabbah                            | 39 |
| Leviticus Rabbah                          | 44 |
| Ecclesiastes Rabbah                       | 45 |
| Midrash Tanhuma                           | 47 |
| Yalkut Shimon                             | 52 |
| Chapter Five - Medieval Bible Exegetes    | 56 |
| Rashi                                     | 56 |
| Joseph Kara                               | 59 |
| Radak                                     | 61 |
| Ramban                                    | 66 |
| Isaiah ben Mali di Trani                  | 69 |
| Levi ben Gershom                          | 71 |
| Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel                 | 74 |
| Moshe Alshekh                             | 77 |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Samuel ben Abraham Laniado                 | 80         |
| Aharon ben Abraham Ibn Hayyim              | 83         |
| <b>Chapter Six - Modern Bible Exegetes</b> | <b>88</b>  |
| Me'am Lo'ez                                | 88         |
| Moses Landau                               | 91         |
| Malbim                                     | 92         |
| Moshe Tedeschi                             | 96         |
| Joseph Herman Hertz                        | 98         |
| Theodor Gaster                             | 100        |
| Yehezkel Kaufmann                          | 102        |
| Elia Samuele Artom                         | 104        |
| Da'at Miqra'                               | 106        |
| David Marcus                               | 108        |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                          | <b>111</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>                        | <b>119</b> |

## Acknowledgments

The writing and preparation of this thesis could not have been completed without the support of the following people

First and foremost, Dr B Barry Levy who never tired (or never let me know he tired) of my frequent visits to his office, with lists of questions and problems in hand. His personal library, to which I was fortunate to have access, supplied many of the sources of this work that are otherwise unavailable in Montreal's libraries. His eagerness to teach and challenge and his vast amount of knowledge were always sources of encouragement and guidance. His patience, his counsel, and the time he devoted to helping me, listening to my queries, and correcting my work went above and beyond the responsibilities of professor and thesis supervisor.

My parents, Goldie and Jack Abecassis, and my in-laws, Goldie and Hershey Warshawsky, who support me in my studies and who always take great pride in my accomplishments.

Last, but certainly not least, my husband, Paul, who has the confidence in my abilities that I myself lack. His criticisms and compliments of my writings are always the most honest and sincere. He is my primary source of encouragement and the strength behind my actions, he is the only one who knows how to make me smile when it's the last thing I feel like doing. This work is dedicated to him.

## Introduction

The story of Jephthah's daughter unfolds in nine verses in Judges 11. In this short narrative a nameless virgin innocently dances her way to the outskirts of the city to greet her father upon his return from a victorious battle. This demonstrative act of love and pride for her heroic father begins the end of her young life. Prior to going to war, her father, Jephthah, in a last effort to ensure victory against Ammon, vowed to God that if he won the war he would sacrifice as a burnt-offering that which would come to greet him upon his return. Jephthah is devastated to see his daughter, but unable to go back on his word, "he did to her his vow that he had vowed" (Judg. 11:39).<sup>1</sup>

The story of Jephthah's daughter is not easy to digest, a leader of the Israelites and a hero of the Bible murdered his own daughter. Elie Wiesel writes in his book *Sages and Dreamers*

This story is frightening. It is so frightening that I wish it could be erased from Scripture. Its brutality is almost unsurpassed.<sup>2</sup>

In Deut. 18:9-10, the Israelites are warned

When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to copy the abominations of those nations. Let no one be found among you who passes his son or daughter through the fire, or who practices magic, a sorcerer and a soothsayer and a wizard.

Ritual sacrifice of children, whether performed by other nations or not, was expressly

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<sup>1</sup>Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, all chapter verse citations will be from Judges.

<sup>2</sup>Elie Wiesel, "Jephthah and His Daughter," in *Sages and Dreamers*, (New York: Summit Books, 1991), p. 35.

forbidden to the Israelites<sup>3</sup>. They were given specific guidelines as to what was appropriate for an offering to God and what was not<sup>4</sup>. And yet the text suggests that leader of the nation slaughtered his own daughter on the altar.

Short as it is, the narrative is replete with textual and grammatical problems, as well as conceptual difficulties. One cannot expect a modern reader of the Bible to identify with and to accept every practice, ritual, or belief that is described in this ancient text, but one can expect to find an explanation for these practices or comparable examples in the Bible itself. Moreover, if the ritual or belief in one particular case is extraordinary, one would expect some type of reaction, be it justification or condemnation. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter is not an ordinary scenario. The period of the Judges does not include regular child sacrifices. Each narrative for every one of the Israelite judges includes tales of war and military victories, not one judge (except for Jephthah) sacrificed a human being in exchange for victory<sup>5</sup>. However, an examination of the history of Jewish Bible exegesis of this narrative will demonstrate that the world chose, for the most part, to ignore this story. Difficult phrases in the text are defined and explained. The military context is expounded, and Jephthah's character as a leader of the people is analyzed. His role as a father, his responsibility to his daughter, and the whole issue of

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<sup>3</sup>See also Deut. 12:30-31 and Lev. 18:21.

<sup>4</sup>Lev. 1-8.

<sup>5</sup>The text does not clearly state what exactly was involved in the fulfillment of Jephthah's vow.

<sup>6</sup>In II Kings 3:27, Mesha, King of Moab, offers his first-born son as a burnt-offering, and in Gen. 22, God commands Abraham to sacrifice to Him his son, Isaac, but neither instance involves a judge. The former incident did not involve an Israelite, in the latter one, the sacrifice was halted before it could be carried through.

her brutal death are barely even mentioned

The intention of this work is to examine a sample of the Jewish responses to the story of Jephthah's daughter beginning with the Bible itself and continuing until the twentieth century, and to demonstrate that, despite the clarification of details in the story, the commentators have failed to deal with the larger historical and ethical problems that emerge from this text. After many centuries of interpretation, one would expect not only to understand all the words and phrases of the narrative, but the story as a whole. Unfortunately, many ambiguities remain.

My work contains two main sections. After a brief summary of the background information the Bible provides on Jephthah and the events preceding and following the narrative concerning his daughter, the first section outlines the textual problems of the verses relating to Jephthah's vow and the subsequent interaction with his daughter. This section also presents the conceptual difficulties, some of which (although not all) stem from the textual and grammatical inconsistencies. The purpose of this section is not to correct the text or to establish "the proper" translation; it aims to enlighten the reader to the degree to which this text is ambiguous and to demonstrate the numerous difficulties involved in its interpretation.

The second section provides the responses to these issues, at least as far as they are dealt with by the Jewish writers I have examined. The analysis begins with the mention of Jephthah in the Bible and continues through the periods of the Targumim, the Talmud, the midrashim, and the medieval and modern Bible commentators. In the presentation of these interpretations, the questions they raise and the explanations they



offer, the style of the individual commentary also will be taken into account. For example, when it is the style of a particular exegete to only provide definitions for difficult phrases, he cannot be criticized for not providing an historical explanation for human sacrifice.

Murder, rape, war, and other forms of brutal violence are common themes in the book of Judges, an anthology of the heroic exploits of the Israelite leaders. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter perhaps gets lost among the numerous tales of death. But her story is different. And it is both difficult and problematic.

**Section One:**  
**The Story and its Problems**

## Chapter One - The Biblical Story

The book of Judges contains a collection of narratives about Israel's military leaders and their battles prior to the establishment of the monarchy. The thirteen judges acted as leaders of the people, and they served for anywhere from three years (Avimelekh) to eighty years (Ehud ben Gerah). Jephthah, the ninth judge of Israel, led the nation for six years. Most of the stories of the judges revolve around a single theme: the Israelites sin and God punishes them by inciting their enemies against them. With the threat of defeat, destruction and death, the people cry out to God in repentance, and God, merciful as He is, sends them a military leader who will save them and win the war in which they are threatened. The details of each narrative change with the individual judge and the changing enemies, but the pattern remains the same.

With the story of Jephthah, the pattern is broken. In 10:5, the judge Yair dies and is buried. As has come to be expected, the reader is then told:

The Israelites again did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. They worshipped the Baalim and the Ashtaroth, and the gods of Aram, and the gods of Sidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and they abandoned the Lord and did not serve Him (10:6).

God's reaction is also expected: "And the Lord was furious with Israel, and delivered them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the children of Ammon" (10:7). This time however when the Israelites pray to God and beg forgiveness, He refuses to come to their rescue, and the people are obligated to organize their own defense and find

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<sup>1</sup>Yaakov Madan and Ruthi Madan, "Yiftah Be-Doro," *Megadim*, vol. 1, (1988), p. 23

their own leader Chapter ten ends at this point and the plight of the Israelites remains unresolved

At first glance, the narrative that begins in chapter eleven does not appear to be related to the events of the previous chapter The scene ends with the suspense of the Israelite's imminent defeat, yet when the curtain rises once again the panic and anxiety of battle without the help of God is gone and the focus appears to be the life of one individual Israelite At the moment of heightened suspense, the narration stops and says "Meanwhile there was a man named Jephthah " Then, through the story of Jephthah, the two narratives are brought together and the reader is led to see the whole picture and the relationship between Jephthah's role as military leader and the war with the Ammonites

Chapter eleven begins by telling the reader three facts about Jephthah he was a mighty warrior, he was the son of a prostitute, and Gilead was his father (11 1) Jephthah's father's wife (not his mother) bore Gilead other sons who taunted Jephthah and chased him from the house, because he did not share the same mother Jephthah fled and settled in the land of Tob, where he gathered a band of society's rejects, and together they went raiding (11 2-3) These three short verses suggest that Jephthah was probably very lonely, very tough, and also very bitter towards the rest of the mainstream Israelite society that had rejected him With this characterization established, the text connects the narrative to the events left at chapter ten "Some time later, the Ammonites went to war against Israel And when the Ammonites fought with Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah back from the land of Tob" (11 4-5)

When the elders of Gilead come to bring Jephthah to fight their war with Ammon,

he does not demonstrate an eagerness to be accepted. He is suspicious and hostile, and he only agrees to assist once the elders promise he will be the leader of all the inhabitants of Gilead (11:8). Upon his return to Gilead, the character of Jephthah changes from a tough angry outcast to a clever military and political figure. He does not rush out to attack Ammon and win the war, rather he sends messengers to Ammon on two occasions (11:12+14) to try and work things out peacefully. When negotiation and explanation are unsuccessful, Jephthah prepares to go to war and the text relates that "the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah" (11:29) as he marched out to battle. Here begins the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter. With God on his side, Jephthah goes to war, and perhaps in a last moment of doubt he vows his infamous vow to God to sacrifice the being that comes to greet him upon his return from a successful battle with Ammon. The defeat of Ammon is tremendous, and Jephthah returns a great hero. He returns however to his daughter and the realization that he must sacrifice her to God. Upon seeing his daughter, "he tore his clothes and said, 'Ah, my daughter! You have brought me low, you have become my troubler! For I have opened my mouth to the Lord and I cannot rescind'" (11:35). The daughter encourages her father to carry out his vow, but requests only two months to be permitted to wander in the hills and bewail her maidenhood. Jephthah allows her to go, and at the end of two months, "he did to her his vow that he had vowed" (11:39). A custom is then established in Israel that four days each year the Israelite maidens mourn for Jephthah's daughter (11:40).

The story of Jephthah the judge ends in the following chapter with a civil war between the men of Gilead and the men of Ephraim. The Ephraimites were insulted that

Jephthah had not asked them to join in the battle with Ammon (12 1) Jephthah goes to war with Ephraim and slays forty-two thousand (12 6) The narrative concludes "Jephthah led Israel six years Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and he was buried in the towns of Gilead"(12 7)

## Chapter Two - The Problems

### Textual Problems

The narrative of Jephthah's daughter can be divided into four parts: 1) Jephthah's vow, 2) Jephthah's return from the war with Ammon, 3) the exchange between father and daughter, and 4) the epilogue. Each section contains many difficulties both having to do with the textual inconsistencies of the actual passage as well as the conceptual obstacles that render the ideas, the rationale and the logic behind the narrative incomprehensible to the reader. This section will not attempt to answer any of the questions that will be raised nor discuss the debates concerning the problems that will be presented. The goal is only to sensitize the reader to the difficult nature of this narrative and the problems that faced the exegetes who will be introduced in the subsequent section.

#### *1) Jephthah's Vow*

The vow that Jephthah makes to God before going out to war against Ammon is found in 11:31. The problems in the vow introduce those in the rest of the narrative for, if one cannot understand to what Jephthah is referring in his vow, one cannot evaluate the events that occur as a result of it. In order to properly grasp the textual difficulties of the narrative it is necessary to examine the Hebrew, for many problems are often resolved in translation, itself an interpretation. Therefore, the transliteration of the vow is presented as follows:

we-hayah ha-yose' ašer yese mi-daltei beiti li-qra'ti be-šubi be-  
šalom mi-benei `amon we-hayah la-yhwh we-ha'alitihu `olah

The first difficulty in the vow is the double introductory formula of *ha-yose' ašer*

*yese'* Translated literally, this would say "the one that goes out who shall go out," the repetition in English is awkward and in Hebrew, unnecessary. The verse would have made perfect sense without one or the other phrase. Together one must consider possibilities of dittography, redactional activity<sup>1</sup> or intentionally unusual usage.

The second textual difficulty is the repetition of the word *we-hayah* (and it/he shall be), the verse would be grammatically correct without the second occurrence of the word (*we-hayah la-yhwh*). The key parts of the vow are translated as follows: "And he shall be, the being that goes out from and he shall be to the Lord." Marcus cites additional biblical vows in which a subject is unambiguously stated in the outcome of the vow, in Gen. 28:20-22 for example, Jacob's vow concludes "*we-hayah yhwh li*," where God is the subject.<sup>2</sup> Marcus suggests the possibility that the subject in Jephthah's vow has been omitted and that the second *we-hayah* should read *we-hayah la-yhwh hu'* or *hu' yhiyeh la-yhwh*.<sup>3</sup> It is also possible that due to the length of the vow and the amount of information included in relation to the potential sacrifice that the narrator felt it necessary to redirect the reader to the beginning of the verse, to remind him of the circumstances and conditions of the vow.

The third and final textual difficulty of Jephthah's vow is its outcome - what Jephthah will do if God delivers Ammon into his hands: *we-hayah la-yhwh we-ha'alutihu*

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<sup>1</sup>David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1986), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Marcus, pp. 22-23. Josh. 2:19 and I Sam. 17:25 are two other biblical vows in which a subject is clearly stated in the effect of the vow.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*



*’olah* This being will be dedicated to God, and Jephthah will offer it as a burnt-offering. Does Jephthah's burnt-offering serve as a clarification of what is meant by "dedication to God," or are the dedication and the burnt-offering two separate actions or events? As will be demonstrated below, the reinterpretation of this particular phrase will serve as the turning point in the understanding of the fate of Jephthah's daughter.

## 2) *Jephthah's Return from the War with Ammon*

In the second part of the narrative, Jephthah returns from his successful battle with Ammon to find his daughter coming to greet him (11:34-35). From the high of victory, he is brought to the depths of grief and despair. The transliterated text states:

wa-yavo yiftah ha-mispeh el beito we-hineh bito yos et liqra to  
be-tupim u-bimeholot we-raq hi yehidah ain lo mimenu ben o  
bat wa-yehi kir oto otah wa-yiqra' et begadav wa-yomer ahah  
biti hakhre'a hikhra'tini we- at hayit be'okhray we- anokhi pasiti  
pi 'el yhwh we-lo ukhal la-šub

As Jephthah approaches his home town, his daughter appears, dancing and beating her timbrels, to greet her heroic father. The first textual difficulty in this section is the phrase *we-raq hi' yehidah*. If *yehidah* means "alone," in the sense that the daughter came out to greet her father all by herself, then the word *raq* is redundant. Translated literally the phrase reads "And only she came out alone," the syntax of the phrase is not wrong, but it is awkward and could do without either "only" or "alone." If the intended meaning of the word *yehidah* refers to the idea that she is Jephthah's only daughter (or child), which is then expanded upon in the following clause - *ain lo mimenu ben o bat*, then the word *raq* may be present solely to emphasize this contributing factor to the tragedy, that not

only is Jephthah losing a child, but he is losing his only child. Again, however, the rendering of the phrase remains awkward and the word *raq* appears out of place.

The only other textual difficulty in this unit is in the phrase *ain lo mimenu ben* 'to but'. As demonstrated above, one can read the beginning of the verse in two ways: "And only she came out to greet her father" or "And she was his only child." Either way one would expect the final part of the sentence to expand upon the daughter. However, rather than describing the family situation or the status of the daughter, the verse reads "And he did not have *mimenu* (from him) either a son or a daughter." The structure of the phrase is very difficult to resolve. Ideally, one would like the verse to read, "And he did not have *his mimenah* (besides for her) neither a son nor a daughter." But the text does not say this and one must try to understand what is meant by what is presented. In some printed Bibles there is a masoretic note suggesting a possible emendation to *mimenah* (from her), but this does not really solve the problem, unless one would suggest that the phrase is referring to Jephthah's lack of grandchildren from his daughter due to the fact that she was still a virgin.<sup>4</sup>

### 3) *The Exchange between Father and Daughter*

The third section of this narrative comprises the daughter's response to her father's vow. Jephthah never states outright what he has vowed to God to do, but the daughter appears to understand. She encourages her father to fulfill his duty to the Lord and to the

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<sup>4</sup>The masoretic note is "*sevirin mimenah*," which suggests a possible emendation or a preferred reading. The note originates from *Massorah Gedolah Manuscript B 19a de Leningrad*, vol. 1, ed. by Gerard Weil, (Rome: Piazza della Pilota, 1971), p. 235.

people who have been saved from Ammon, she is ever the obedient and pious child. The text is as follows

wa-tomer eilaw avi pasitah et pikha el vhw 'aseh li ka šer  
 yaša mi-pikha aharei ašer 'asah le-kha vhw neqamot me-  
 oiveka mi-benay 'amon wa-tomer el aviha ve'aseh li ha-davar  
 ha-zeh harpeh mimeni šenayim hodašim we- elkhah we-varadeti 'al  
 he-harim we- ebkeh 'al betulav anokhi we-re'otav wa-vo mer  
 lekhi wa-yišlah otah šenayim hodašim wa-telekh hi we-re'otevha  
 wa-tebkh 'al betuleiha 'al he-harim

The first difficulty with this unit is the repetition of *wa-tomer* (And she said). Verse 36 begins with the daughter speaking to Jephthah and the text says "And she said to him, 'My father '" In verse 37, she is still speaking to her father, and no one has interrupted her, and yet the text says again, "And she said to her father " Why did the text find it necessary to introduce the daughter's speech twice? Are her two items of discussion so totally different that they require independent introduction? Could Jephthah have originally responded to his daughter's first statement, but his response is no longer extant? The possible explanations for these difficulties must be explored if not resolved.

The plural of the word revenge (*neqamot*) is the second difficulty in this section (11.36). Up until this point in the narrative, Jephthah has only fought this one battle with Ammon. Why then does the daughter say to her father "Do to me as has come out from your mouth for God has already done for you *the vengeance* against your enemies, against the sons of Ammon?" Likewise, the plural of enemies is problematic, for Jephthah's only enemy is Ammon. Moreover, the repetitive use of the preposition "against (*me*)" presents a syntactical ambiguity. Is "sons of Ammon" intended to expand

upon "enemies" or are the two clauses referring to two separate groups?

The final textual problem of this unit is the phrase *we-yaraden 'al he-harim* - "And I shall descend upon the mountains" (11 37). One does not usually descend on mountains, one climbs them. One must consider when examining this difficulty the flexible use of the preposition in the Bible and the possibility that replacing "on" with something else may render the concept more comprehensible. One could also suggest that in this particular unit *yarad* might not mean "go down" or *har* might not mean "mountain".

#### 4) The Epilogue

In the last unit of the narrative, Jephthah fulfills his part of the vow, and the reader is told that a custom developed among the Israelite women to remember Jephthah's daughter four days every year. Verses 39 and 40 are as follows:

wa-yehi miqes šenayim hodašim wa-tašav 'el aviha wa-ya'as lah  
 'et nidro 'ašer nadar we-hi lo' yada'h iš wa-tehi hoq be-yisra'el  
 miyamim yemimah telekhnah benot yisra'el le-tanot le-vat yiftah  
 ha-gil'adi arba'at yamim ba-šanah

The only real textual problem in this section is the phrase *wa-tehi hoq be-yisra'el* (11 39), "And there was a custom (or law) in Israel". The difficulty lies in the lack of accord between the verb and the subject. *Hoq* is a masculine noun, but *wa-tehi* is third person, singular, *feminine*. Could the verb be referring to a different subject than is obvious in the phrase? Could there be an error in the text? Is it possible that the daughter is the subject of the verb and perhaps she, or at least her experience, has become the custom? Could the word *hoq* have been considered feminine since the plural form is *huqot*, with

the ending typical for feminine nouns?

The textual difficulties in the narrative on Jephthah's daughter are numerous, and many if not most do not have definitive answers. Moreover, not all of these problems were considered by all of the commentators. The remainder of this chapter will present the conceptual difficulties of the narrative - the issues of the story that may be difficult to understand or accept even if one ignores the often nit-picking problems of the text.

### Conceptual Problems

Many ideas and concepts in the narrative of Jephthah's daughter are difficult for the reader to understand. This may be because portions of the text have been lost, causing a loss of flow of logic, or because some aspects of ancient culture are so foreign to post-biblical readers that they fail to understand the basic text or to accept what it appears to state.

First the reader must determine what Jephthah really intended to sacrifice. Is it possible that he intended to sacrifice a human, although perhaps not his only daughter? If he did not intend to sacrifice his daughter, he must have known that it was customary for the young women to come dancing out to greet the men upon their return from a victorious battle,<sup>5</sup> raising if not insuring, the chance that his daughter would be among them. Moreover, the text tells the reader that the spirit of God had rested upon Jephthah (11:29), why then did Jephthah feel it necessary to make a vow to God to ensure his

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<sup>5</sup>In Ex 15:20 Miriam and the other women danced with timbrels after God drowned the Egyptians in the sea, and in I Sam 18:6-7 the women danced with timbrels and chanted upon David's return from a successful war with the Philistines.

victory when God was already on his side?

Within the content of the narrative Jephthah never repeats to his daughter the conditions of the vow and the fate that he has sealed for her. The consistent use of phrases such as "I opened my mouth" (11 35) and "You opened your mouth" (11 36) and "His vow that he vowed" (11 39) gives the distinct impression that the issue at hand is being consciously avoided. How did the daughter know what was going on? Had there been rumours in town prior to Jephthah's return? This might explain why no one else went to greet Jephthah, yet why would the daughter not have stayed away as well? Is it possible that the narrator is being deliberately vague in order to spare the reader the hardship of reading of such cruelty and such tragedy?

Although the reader may not be clear on what Jephthah's daughter's fate is to be, she understands and makes her final request to bewail her maidenhood (11 37). What does it mean to bewail one's maidenhood? Is she mourning the fact that she is destined to remain a virgin or perhaps that she will never have children? In two months she might have been able to lose her virginity if it bothered her so much, but she could not bear a child in such a short period of time. If it is, in fact, her everlasting virginity that she is lamenting because she is going to die, why is her sexual status more worthy of mourning than her soul?

In the epilogue of the narrative, the text tells of a custom that was established for the women of Israel to remember the daughter of Jephthah for four days every year. How long did this custom last and why did it stop? Are there any remnants of it in any of the practices in Jewish tradition today or perhaps in other cultures?

The narrative of Jephthah and his daughter is so replete with difficulties, that more questions endure than text. The aim of exploring a biblical text is to understand the story as a whole, to place the events of the narrative in its religious, social, and political contexts, and to accept the characters for who they were, for their faults and for their strengths. Jephthah and his daughter demand a lot of their readers, but it is often the most difficult experiences that have the most to teach and that can be the most rewarding.

The remainder of my work will examine what over the centuries has been said about the experiences of Jephthah and his daughter. Different exegetes were bothered by different problems, and varying approaches to the narrative result in varying impressions with which the reader is left. Not all the difficulties are addressed, and the responses and methodologies are multi-faceted. Yet in the end the reader will be amazed that the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter remains ambiguous and problematic.

**Section Two:**  
**The Solutions**



## Chapter Three - Ancient Texts

In the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter, the father, leader of the nation, makes a vow, the intention of which is unclear and his daughter suffers. How do the survivors of this story - the contemporaries of Jephthah and their descendants - respond to his actions? Is Jephthah condemned for murder, or are his actions condoned and perhaps even praised? The group of Jewish exegetes whose work will be explored in this chapter consists of the references to Jephthah in the Bible outside of the narrative under discussion, the renditions of the story in the Targumim, the comments of the rabbis in the Talmudic period and the interpretations of the medieval and modern commentators. The reader will be guided through each historical level of exegesis in as chronological a manner as possible. The complete commentary of each individual or each work will not be provided. Rather the highlights and the innovations will be expanded upon. A minimum amount of background information and biographical details will be included concerning each commentary the first time it is mentioned in order to situate the reader in the historical and social context of the writing under discussion. The intention of this section is to look at how each exegete deals with the tragedy of Jephthah's daughter, what methodology is utilized and what assumptions are made about the text.

### The Bible

After Jephthah fulfills his vow, the narrative continues with his role as military leader, the incident with his daughter is completely ignored. The Israelite judge defeats a brother tribe in a civil war, and the reader is told that, after six years in a leadership position, Jephthah dies. Was he heartbroken over the loss of his daughter? Was he

alienated by the rest of society? Was the fulfillment of his vow regarded as murder? Why was the length of his leadership so short? The incident of Jephthah's daughter occurs and then vanishes. There is no description of Jephthah's life without his daughter and no account of the reactions of the nation. One could draw the conclusion that perhaps the sacrifice of children in exchange for victory was commonplace at the time and therefore the narrator felt no need to expand upon the uncomfortable actions of the judge. However, if the sacrifice of children was common, one would expect to find more than one isolated incident accounted for in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> It seems more plausible that the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter was extraordinary, and perhaps the narrator felt that it would be better for all involved if the event was just laid to rest and forgotten. The nation's leader's murder of his own daughter would not be a proud moment in Israelite history.

Jephthah is mentioned only once more, in I Sam. 12:11, which reads

And the Lord sent Jerubbaal and Bedan and Jephthah and Samuel,  
and saved you from your surrounding enemies, and you dwelt in  
security.

This one recollection of Jephthah remembers him as a successful warrior and a saviour of the Israelite people; the sacrifice of his daughter plays no factor in the role he is given in history. To his descendants, Jephthah was a hero; all that could tarnish this image was forgotten. Phyllis Tribble writes

[T]he mighty warrior prevails uncensored, the violence that he  
perpetrated upon his only daughter stalks him not at all. In the end

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<sup>1</sup> See page 2, note #6

he dies a natural death and receives an epitaph fit for an exemplary judge<sup>2</sup>

The text does an excellent job of erasing the tragedy from the mind of the reader without actually removing the account from the book itself. Jephthah is remembered for his military success and his exemplary leadership qualities, in the eyes of the narrator his daughter's death is unrelated, unimportant, and better forgotten.

### The Versions

In the ancient Greek, Aramaic, and Syriac versions of the Bible, the reader begins to see an attempt to rectify some of the inconsistencies and difficulties in the text. Some of the problematic grammatical constructions are corrected, and in one case, an additional line of comment is included in the translation. These versions are obviously not commentaries on the text, they are interpretations. In order to render a narrative into another language the translator has to make certain decisions regarding the meaning of difficult words and ideas. In that sense, the examination of a translation provides the reader with one possible understanding of the story.

#### *The Septuagint*

The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Bible. It is believed to have been completed by the first century C. E. and is of Egyptian origin.<sup>3</sup> The Letter of Aristeas

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<sup>2</sup>Phyllis Trible, "A Daughter's Death: Feminism, Literary Criticism and the Bible," in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 22, (1983), p. 187.

<sup>3</sup>W. Schwarz, "Discussions on the Origin of the Septuagint," in *Studies in the Septuagint: Origins, Recensions, and Interpretations*, ed. by Sidney Jellicoe, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1974), p. 110.

contains the legendary account of the origin of the Greek translation of the Pentateuch, reinforced by the oldest Talmudic record on the matter (BT Meg 9a)<sup>4</sup> The translation of the Pentateuch was probably completed in the third century B C E, and the remaining biblical books somewhat later<sup>5</sup>

In general, the Greek translation of this narrative maintains all the ambiguities of the biblical version<sup>6</sup> In the recitation of the vow it is a masculine object that is used in reference to who/what is to be sacrificed as opposed to the neuter object (equivalent to "it") that is available in the Greek language<sup>7</sup> However, this could easily refer to either an animal or a human, and so the identity of Jephthah's intended sacrifice continues to escape the reader In the scene in which the daughter appears before her father and the narrator is describing that she has come alone and that she is his only child, the Septuagint does clarify the difficult Hebrew The rendering of the Greek is in fact equivalent to *hys mimenah* (besides for her) as opposed to the problematic Hebrew *mimenu* (from him)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The Letter of Aristeas relates the legendary origin of the translation in which seventy-two elders were summoned from Jerusalem by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246 B C E) Each individual elder was placed in a separate room and told to translate the Pentateuch into Greek All the renditions were identical and believed to be superior to the original because of "obvious" divine inspiration The legend was exaggerated and embellished over the centuries until the seventy-two elders were credited with the translation of the entire Bible See *Aristeas to Philocrates*, ed and trans by Moses Hadas, (New York Harper Publishing, 1951)

<sup>5</sup>Schwarz, p 110

<sup>6</sup>*Septuaginta*, ed by Alfred Rahlfs, 8th edition, (Germany Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt Stuttgart, 1965), p 456

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, 1131

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, p 457, 1134

### *Targum Jonathan*

According to the Babylonian Talmud, the Aramaic translation of the Former Prophets was written by Jonathan ben Uzziel (Meg. 3a), Hillel's most prominent pupil (BB 134a, Suk 28a). This would make the Targum Palestinian, originating in the first century B. C. E. However, the final redaction of the text of the Targum occurred in Babylon, no earlier than the fifth century C. E.<sup>9</sup>

The most significant aspect of the Aramaic translation of the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is an expansion within the text as to what exactly was the *hoq* (custom or rule) that was established in Israel. The Hebrew of verse 39 reads:

After two months' time, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She had never known a man. So it/she became a custom in Israel.

The Targum adds to this verse the following:

And it was made a rule in Israel in order that a man not offer up his son and his daughter as a burnt-offering as Jephthah the Gileadite did. And he did not request absolution from Pinhas the priest for if he had requested absolution from Pinhas the priest, he would have redeemed her with payment.<sup>10</sup>

This addition to the text is evidence that the compiler of the Aramaic translation (or a later redactor) was bothered by the effects of Jephthah's actions. He assures the reader

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<sup>9</sup>Leivy Smolar and Moses Aberbach, *Studies in Targum Jonathan to the Prophets*, (New York and Baltimore: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., and The Baltimore Hebrew College, 1983), p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup>See Marcus Jastrow, *Sefer Milim*, (New York: Judaica Press, Inc., 1989), p. 313, for the meaning of the word *damim*, translated as "payment." Note the pun on *damim* and *damim*, the latter meaning blood.

that child sacrifice was not a common practice among Israelites and that Jephthah's actions instigated the need for a clearly stated law forbidding such violence. Furthermore, the suggestion is made in the Targum that Jephthah would have been able to have his vow annulled had he consulted Pinhas. This lays at least partial blame for the death of the daughter on Jephthah and takes a position against Jephthah's actions. In other words, where the Hebrew text remains neutral, nonjudgmental and objective, the Targum implies that what Jephthah did is not worthy of approval.

Aside from this significant addition to the narrative, the Targum sticks fairly close to the original Hebrew. The difficulties with the double introductory formula and the preposition *min* with a third person, singular masculine pronominal suffix remain. The one textual problem that is rectified is the phrase "descend on the mountains" (11:37). The Targum renders the word *we-varadeti* as *wa-etmagid* meaning "and I shall withdraw."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Jephthah's daughter requests of her father to "go and withdraw upon the mountains." Logically, this makes more sense, given Jephthah's daughter's state of mind with her death so imminent, it seems likely that she would wish to withdraw from the people of her village to ponder her fate in the serenity of the mountains. Moreover, as discussed above, it is difficult to imagine how one might "descend on

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<sup>11</sup>It is believed by the rabbis that Pinhas was the High Priest at the time of Jephthah, because he is mentioned in Judg. 20 relating to the story of the war against the Benjaminites and the incident of the concubine at Gibeah.

<sup>12</sup>Jastrow, p. 872. The root of the word is *ngd*, and it appears here in the *lithpael* form.

mountains," "withdraw" eliminates this problem.

While the Targum has improved the reading of the narrative of Jephthah's daughter slightly, many of the original questions still remain. The reader is still not clear on Jephthah's intentions in making his vow, nor have the significance of some of the repetitions and the vague nature of the text been clarified, but the reader is provided with a reaction to the story. The compiler of the Targum obviously felt very strongly about the possible effect of Jephthah's, and therefore, ensured that it was understood that this type of worship is not favourable, and is in fact forbidden.

#### *The Peshitta*

The Peshitta is the Syriac translation of the Bible, and it is basically a word for word translation of the Hebrew. There is much controversy as to its origin and history. Some claim it is of Christian origin, because the translation is not mentioned in the Talmud and because the headings of Psalms and some of the verses of Isaiah are Christian in nature. Others believe in a Jewish authorship because of the Aramaisms, the division of Psalms into five books, and a number of other clues. The general consensus among scholars is that the place of origin of the Peshitta is Edessa and that the translation of the entire Hebrew Bible was completed by the fourth century C. E. It is known that the Peshitta was accepted as an authoritative text in the Syrian church from the end of the

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<sup>13</sup>See Eliezer Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, vol. 3, (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Publisher, 1960), p. 2150. He explains the word *yarad* to come from the root *r-w-d* meaning to wander here and there.

third century C E<sup>14</sup>

The Syriac translation of the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is very close to the Hebrew text<sup>15</sup>. The double introductory phrase of the vow is eliminated, but the same ambiguity as to who or what is intended in the vow remains. The phrase *mn d-npq* (11:31) can be translated as either "who shall come out" or "what shall come out"<sup>16</sup>.

The one interesting difference between the Peshitta and the Hebrew text is the translation of the phrase *ain lo mimenu* ("he did not have from him," 11:34). Rather than the masculine ending on the preposition, the Peshitta renders the phrase *lout hu' lah* - "he did not have from her". This follows the masoretic emendation found in some printed Bibles<sup>17</sup>. The feminine ending of the preposition may be an attempt to correct the problematic Hebrew rendition, but in a sense it is equally difficult. The narrator could be alluding to the fact that his daughter was unmarried and had not yet produced grandchildren for him, but is this a father's main concern when his only daughter is to die? Other questions arise as to whether the author of the Peshitta translated this verse from a Hebrew version that had *mimenah* or whether he changed his text because he thought the Hebrew original was faulty.

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<sup>14</sup>"Peshitta ve-Targumim Suriyim," in "Miqra," *Ha-Encyclopedia ha-Ivrit*, vol. 24, (Jerusalem: Hevrah le-Hoset Encyclopediot Ltd., 1972), pp. 303-304.

<sup>15</sup>P. B. Dirksen, Judges, in *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version*, vol. 2, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), pp. 34-36.

<sup>16</sup>*A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, ed. by J. Payne Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 248 and p. 280.

<sup>17</sup>See page 12, note #4.



## Pseudo-Philo

Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Biblical Antiquities) is a retelling of Israelite history from Adam to David, embellished with legendary expansions. The latest possible date for this work is 100 C. E., but most scholars prefer to date it before 70 C. E., possibly around the time of Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Pseudo-Philo seems to have originated in Palestine. He is differentiated from the Alexandrian Philo because his manner of dealing with the Bible is unlike Philo's allegorizing. Moreover, there are many contradictions between *Biblical Antiquities* and Philo's writings. In addition, Philo wrote in Greek, and the scholarly world has accepted Leopold Cohn's theory that the Latin text of Pseudo-Philo is a translation from the Greek and that underlying the Greek was a Hebrew original.<sup>19</sup>

The basic development of the plot in the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter in Pseudo-Philo's work is the same as in the Bible. Jephthah makes a vow before going out to war, his daughter comes to greet him, and he sacrifices her. There are however many subtle adjustments and modifications to the biblical version that lead one to read and understand the narrative in a different light.

The first variation worthy of mention is the absence of the idea that as Jephthah prepared to go to war with Ammon, "the spirit of the Lord came upon him" (11:29). In Pseudo-Philo, God has nothing to do with Jephthah. His spirit does not rest upon him as

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<sup>18</sup>"Pseudo-Philo," translated by D. J. Harrington, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2, (New York: Doubleday, 1985,) p. 299.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 298-300.

he marches out to battle, nor does Jephthah address his vow to God. The text of *Biblical Antiquities* reads

And because the king of the sons of Ammon would not listen to the voice of Jephthah, Jephthah rose up and armed all the people to go out and fight in battle array, saying, 'When the sons of Ammon have been delivered into my hands' (BibAnt 39.10)<sup>20</sup>

The biblical text says

And the king of Ammon did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent him. Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and he passed through Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he crossed over [to] the Ammonites. And Jephthah vowed a vow to the Lord. (11.28-30)

The absence of God from Pseudo-Philo's rendition of the story perhaps suggests that the author did not accept the role God played in this narrative. Cynthia Baker writes concerning the absence of the "spirit of the Lord" that, "If this formula is an indication that what follows is divinely sanctioned, then its omission suggests that Pseudo-Philo rejects this interpretation."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Pseudo-Philo did not condone the idea that God approved of Jephthah's vow. This is further supported by the expansion included after the vow that

God was very angry and said: Behold Jephthah has vowed that he will offer to me whatever meets him first on the way, and now if

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<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 353

<sup>21</sup>Cynthia Baker, "Pseudo-Philo and the Transformation of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Anti-Covenant*, ed. by Mieke Bal, (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), p. 196

a dog should meet Jephthah first, will the dog be offered to me" And now let the vow of Jephthah be accomplished against his own first born, that is against the fruit of his own body, and his request against his only-begotten. But I will surely free my people in this time, not because of him but because of the prayer that Israel prayed (BibAnt 39.11).<sup>22</sup>

With this additional material, Pseudo-Philo manages to accomplish two things: he affirms that Jephthah's intention in his vow was to a non-human sacrifice, and he renders the daughter's sacrifice as divinely ordained while absolving God of her murder.<sup>23</sup> The reader now understands the relationship of Jephthah's vow to the subsequent events, and the narrative begins to make a little more sense. Jephthah's vow angered God, and as punishment he was forced to sacrifice his daughter. The assumption that Jephthah intended a non-human sacrifice indicates that human sacrifice was beyond consideration, as a matter of practice, the Israelites did not sacrifice humans, so Jephthah would not have even contemplated the possibility.

In the vow itself, Pseudo-Philo clarifies the conditions of the sacrifice: "whoever meets me *first* on the way will be a holocaust to the Lord" (BibAnt 39.11).<sup>24</sup> From the biblical text, one questioned the idea that Jephthah should expect only one person to come out to greet him when it was customary for all the young women to dance and to beat timbrels at the hero's arrival.<sup>25</sup> One tends to read the biblical text with the understanding

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<sup>22</sup>Charlesworth, p. 353

<sup>23</sup>Baker, p. 197

<sup>24</sup>Charlesworth, p. 353

<sup>25</sup>See page 15, note #5

that Jephthah meant the *first* to greet him, but in fact this concept of the first is not present in the verses. In *Biblical Antiquities*, however, the author does add this idea, and he carries through with the scene upon Jephthah's return to Mizpeh

And Jephthah returned in peace and women came out to meet him in song and dance. And it was only his daughter who came out of the house first in the dance to meet her father (BibAnt 40.1) <sup>26</sup>

Pseudo-Philo tells of an indeterminate number of women who came out to greet Jephthah,<sup>27</sup> only it was his daughter at the head of the crowd. By inserting the idea of "the first" to greet Jephthah, Pseudo-Philo manages to erase some of the textual difficulties inherent in this part of the narrative: the problem with *raq* and *yehidah* (only and alone, 11.34) and the misconception that only one person would be expected to meet the hero.

Upon recognizing his daughter at the front of the crowd of dancing maidens, Jephthah cries out "Rightly was your name called Seila,"<sup>28</sup> that you might be offered in sacrifice" (BibAnt 40.1) <sup>29</sup>. This is the first and earliest reference to a name given to Jephthah's daughter.<sup>30</sup> The Bible refers to her only as the daughter of Jephthah. With the

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<sup>26</sup>Charlesworth, p. 353

<sup>27</sup>Baker, p. 197

<sup>28</sup>Seila comes from the root *š'l* meaning *ask*, and so *š'yth* is *the one asked for* Charlesworth, p. 353, footnote 40b

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 353

<sup>30</sup>Pseudo-Philo assigns names to five female characters who do not have names in Judges and I Samuel: Sisera's mother, Samson's mother, Micah's mother, Jephthah's daughter, and the witch at Endor. For more information on the naming of anonymous female biblical characters in Pseudo-Philo see Betsy Halpern-Amaru, "Women in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*," in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. by Amy-Jill Levine, (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1991), pp. 94-95.

assignment of a name, Pseudo-Philo begins to develop Seila as an independent character. The conversations with her father concerning her fate are expanded, and before her death she recites a lengthy lament in which she mourns over the fact that when she should be preparing to go to her marriage chamber, she is preparing to go to her death.<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Philo also adds that before going to the mountains, Seila goes to the sages to see if they can help her and annul her father's vow, but "no one could respond to her word" (BibAnt 40.4).<sup>12</sup> Rather than simply request to go to the mountains to bewail her virginity, Seila asks of her father

[T]hat I may go into the mountains and stay in the hills and walk among the rocks, I and my virgin companions, and I will pour out my tears there and pour out the sadness of my youth. And the trees of the field will weep for me, and the beasts of the field will lament over me. For I am not sad that I am to die nor does it give me pain to give back my soul, but because my father was caught up in the snare of his vow and if I did not offer myself willingly for sacrifice, I fear that my death would not be acceptable or I would lose my life in vain. These things I will tell the mountains, and afterward I will return (BibAnt 40.3).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Baker writes concerning the lament that it "stands out from the entire *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* as the only full-blown lyrical composition in the collection. In content as well as in form it differs from everything else written by Pseudo-Philo, including the rest of the Jephthah episode." Baker, p. 199.

<sup>12</sup>Charlesworth, p. 353.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* This lengthy passage is probably an example of "double translation" in which one phrase (in this case, "I shall descend upon the mountains,") is translated numerous times within the same unit. One can see evidence of this phenomenon in the phrases, "I may go into the mountains," "I will pour out my tears there," and "I will tell the mountains." For more information on and examples of "double translation," see B. Barry Levy, *Jargum Neophyti I: A Textual Study*, vol. 1, (Lanham

The narrator of this text spares no description. Where the biblical version appears to circle around the disturbing events taking place without ever stating them outright, Pseudo-Philo is vivid and melodramatic. The characters have lengthy expressions of their feelings, and few details of the narrative are left ambiguous. At the end of the story, Seila returns to her father for the fulfillment of the vow. Here too the author leaves nothing to the sceptical mind.

"[H]e did everything that he had vowed *and offered the holocausts*<sup>14</sup>. Then all the virgins gathered together and buried the daughter of Jephthah and wept for her" (BibAnt 40.8)<sup>15</sup>.

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University Press of America, Inc., 1986), pp. 52-54.

<sup>14</sup>Italics added by editor of Pseudo-Philo.

<sup>15</sup>Charlesworth, p. 354.

The *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (CJ) is a collection of midrashim with many passages parallel to Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. Only one manuscript of the work is still extant, dating from the fourteenth century and preserved in the Bodleian Library, and its compiler was Rabbi Eleazar ben Asher the Levite who lived somewhere in the Rhine provinces. The texts within the compilation are many centuries older than the date of the final work, and its sources include Yosippon and *Sefer ha-Yashar*. See Daniel J. Harrington, "The Hebrew Fragments of Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* preserved in the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*," in *Texts and Translations*, vol. 7, (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974), p. 1 and M. Gaster, *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1971), pp. xxi-xxii.

CJ consists of a continuous narrative beginning with Creation and running through to the destruction of the Temple. Like the work of Pseudo-Philo, it rewrites the biblical story with many embellishments and expansions. It was suggested by Moses Gaster that the Hebrew manuscript of CJ is in fact the lost Hebrew fragments of Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*. This however was refuted by Leopold Cohn, and then later by Daniel Harrington. See Harrington, pp. 1-7.

The story of Jephthah and his daughter in CJ is greatly expanded, but not to the same degree as in *Biblical Antiquities*. Jephthah's vow is made to God, whereas in Pseudo-Philo's work, this aspect of God's role is absent, and the CJ does not contain any account of God's anger as one finds in BibAnt (Gaster, p. 176-177). Similar to BibAnt, CJ tells of many women coming out to greet Jephthah upon his return from

Pseudo-Philo's rendition of the story of Jephthah's daughter is a retelling of the biblical narrative. Because of all the additions and expansions, it is difficult to see how the author deals with the specific textual issues. However, this version is definitely an improvement upon the question ridden nine verses of the Bible. Perhaps Pseudo-Philo's way of dealing with this problematic narrative was to rewrite it in order to eliminate all the ambiguous elements. The characters of the narrative are more developed. The daughter as the victim becomes the focus of the tale. She does more than simply comply with her father's vow. The loss that she will endure due to her father's careless speech is clearly laid out, and its description is made to tug at the reader's heart strings. The actions and motives of God are articulated by the Almighty Himself, and it is noteworthy that in His reaction to Jephthah's vow He is responding to the exact ambiguity that was pointed out earlier: what Jephthah actually intended as a sacrifice. In other words, Pseudo-Philo rectified this ambiguity by filling in a "missing" connector. God was angered by Jephthah's lack of specificity and as punishment sent his daughter out to greet

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battle and it clarifies *yehidah* (11:34) to mean Jephthah's only child. Furthermore, the idea that the daughter was at the head of a group of women, the first, rather than the only, to greet her father, is seen again in this text (*Ibid*, p. 177). Jephthah does not comment upon the daughter's name in his expression of grief as he does in BibAnt, but the daughter's response begins with the clause, "Then said his daughter Seelah" (*Ibid*). Her response is equally long and expansive following the same themes as BibAnt. Granted her request of two months respite, she also goes to consult the sages who are unable to help her (*Ibid*). Again, her lengthy lamentation is parallel to the version in Pseudo-Philo (*Ibid*, pp. 178-179).

Regarding the fulfillment of the vow, CJ is not as direct as BibAnt. Like the Bible, it states that Jephthah "fulfilled the vow he had made." The text adds, however, that "the virgins of Israel buried her," thus clarifying that the daughter had in fact died as a result of her father's vow (*Ibid*, p. 179).

The relationship between CJ and BibAnt is as of yet unclear, but the parallels are blatantly obvious and worthy of mention.

him. The author of *Biblical Antiquities* gives the narrative of Jephthah's daughter the attention and the space that it deserves. He has acknowledged the difficulties and filled in the necessary reactions, emotions, conversations, and details that are needed for the story to make sense.

## Josephus

Josephus Flavius lived from approximately 37 to 100 C.E. He was born to an aristocratic priestly family, and he was well educated. During the Jewish Revolt against the Romans from 66-70 C.E. he was a commander in the Galilee. Upon capture by the Romans, he switched allegiances and tried to convince other Jews to do the same. With the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the Revolt, Josephus went with Titus to live in Rome and was accepted there as a citizen. His major work, *Jewish Antiquities*, written about twenty years after the end of the Revolt, was directed at the non-Jewish world and purports to tell the history of the Jewish people from the time of creation until Josephus' own day.<sup>36</sup> Josephus' works are important sources of knowledge of the biblical text as well as for the period dating from the end of the second century B.C.E. until the year seventy C.E., when the second Temple was destroyed.<sup>37</sup>

In Book 5 of *Jewish Antiquities*, the story of Jephthah's daughter is paraphrased by Josephus.<sup>38</sup> He tells of Jephthah's vow with the same lack of specificity as the vow

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<sup>36</sup>Tessa Rajak, *Josephus, The Historian and his Society*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 1-10.

<sup>37</sup>*Josephus, the Bible and History*, ed. by Louis J. Feldman and Gohei Hata, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), pp. 17-18.

<sup>38</sup>*Josephus*, trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray and Ralph Marcus, vol. 5, (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1934), pp. 119-121.



is originally presented. Josephus writes that Jephthah vowed "to sacrifice should he return to his home unscathed, and to offer up the first creature that should meet him."<sup>39</sup> The idea of a living creature implies that Jephthah was prepared to sacrifice either an animal or a human, the tragedy is not that a human appeared but that the human was his daughter. Josephus also clarifies the problem of the use of *achdah* ("alone," 11:34). He does not state whether the daughter came to greet her father alone, but he does say that she was an only child.<sup>40</sup> Also interesting is Josephus' paraphrase claiming that Jephthah blamed his daughter "for her haste in meeting him."<sup>41</sup> Josephus then comments that

But she without displeasure learnt her destiny, to wit that she must die in return for her father's victory and the liberation of her fellow citizens.<sup>42</sup>

The purpose of this addition is not clear since Josephus does not appear to be minimizing the tragedy of the death of Jephthah's daughter nor the error in Jephthah's actions. To the contrary, he condemns the sacrifice as well as Jephthah for not considering what effect his actions would have on his peers.

At its close [he] sacrificed his child as a burnt offering - a sacrifice neither sanctioned by the law nor well-pleasing to God, for he had not by reflection probed what might befall or in what aspect the deed would appear to them that heard of it.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>*Ibid*, p. 119

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*, p. 121

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid*

Josephus avoids the circular speech found in the biblical text and states outright what the fulfillment of the vow entailed. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as a burnt-offering.<sup>44</sup> Josephus leaves out the whole issue of the daughter's virginity and her taking comfort among her friends. He writes that she requests of her father "to grant two months wherein to bewail her youth with her fellow citizens."<sup>45</sup> Moreover, absent from Josephus' account is the custom that was established after her death, presumably, no remnant of it remained during his lifetime or that of the sources available to him.

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<sup>44</sup>The Bible says "he did to her his vow that he had vowed" (11:39)

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid*

## Chapter Four - Early Rabbinic Literature

### The Babylonian Talmud

The only discussion of Jephthah's actions in the two Talmuds is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanith 4a<sup>1</sup>. Other references to Jephthah in the BT and the PT utilize the words or expressions of the narrative to help explain other issues, the story itself is not commented upon<sup>2</sup>.

The Talmud is not a work of Bible exegesis, nor does it purport to be a paraphrase of the Bible, so one cannot expect the rabbis to have dealt with all of the issues mentioned above. However, they did form very strong opinions regarding the moral and ethical character of the biblical personalities, and they usually found some (relevant<sup>3</sup>) place among their discussions of the Mishnah to contemplate the events of the Bible and to declare to what degree the biblical characters conformed to the rabbinic perception of piety and propriety.

The discussion of Jephthah appears in a passage about the nature of vows, which begins a new issue (unrelated to what precedes it) but leads into what follows. The passage is composed of three sections. In the first one, the rabbis mention that there were three characters of the Bible who made inappropriate vows: Eliezer (Abraham's servant), Saul, and Jephthah. Two had positive outcomes nonetheless, one did not. These vows

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<sup>1</sup>*Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Ta'anit*, vol. 11, ed. by A. Steinsaltz, (Jerusalem: The Israelite Institute for Talmudic Publications, 1989), pp. 18-19.

<sup>2</sup>See PT RH 58 col. 2 and BT Nazir 5a, RH 25a-25b. The last cited source compares Jephthah to Samuel "to teach that the most worthless, once he has been appointed a leader of the community, is to be accounted like the mightiest of the mighty." The translation is taken from *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Moed, Tractate Rosh HaShanah*, trans. by I. Epstein, (London: The Soncino Press, 1938), p. 111.

were inappropriate in the eyes of the rabbis because they were ambiguous. Understanding God to be orchestrating the events behind the scenes, the rabbis expound upon His disapproval of their vows. Abraham's servant, understood by the rabbis to be Eliezer, says to God

And the maiden to whom I say "Please lower your jug and I will drink," and who says, "Drink, and I will also give water to your camels" - she shall be the one whom You have established for Your servant Isaac. And from her shall I know that You have acted favourably with my master (Gen. 24:14)

The rabbis projected that God might not have been pleased with this vague qualification for a wife for Isaac, because a lame or blind girl could have presented herself, but, in any case, he sent Rebekkah. Saul was equally ambiguous when he wished to reward the one who was brave enough to slay Goliath. He is reported as having said

The man who kills him will be rewarded by the king with great riches, he will also give him his daughter in marriage and grant exemption to his father's house in Israel (I Sam. 17:25)<sup>3</sup>

The rabbis projected that God realized the trouble in which Saul could have been with this vow: a slave or a *mamzer* (illegitimate child) might have killed Goliath, and then Saul would have been forced to marry off his princess to a man of lesser status. In any case, God sent David. Jephthah vowed that he would sacrifice to God whatever came to greet him upon his return from victory. According to the rabbis, God was angry that Jephthah might consider sacrificing to Him something forbidden as sacrifice (*tame'*) and so as

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 445

punishment He sent him his daughter The rabbis then present the following verse from Jer 8 22

Is there no balm in Gilead? Can no physician be found? [Why has healing not yet come to my poor people?]<sup>4</sup>

This verse suggests that the rabbis believed that with any effort at all, Jephthah would have found a way to annul his vow As a final point, the rabbis demonstrate how God does not want His subjects to sacrifice humans to Him The following verse is presented and is then divided into clauses and explained

They have built shrines to Baal, to put their children to the fire as burnt-offerings to Baal - which I never commanded, never decreed, and which never came to my mind (Jer 19 5)

The rabbis explain that "which I never commanded" refers to Mesha, king of Moab who sacrificed his son (II Kings 3 27) God never requested such a sacrifice "Never decreed" refers to Jephthah, who spoke of his own accord and who fulfilled the vow on his own, God never required the sacrifice in order to provide Jephthah with his victory against Ammon Finally, "and which never came to my mind" refers to Abraham and the binding of Isaac, for God never intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac His only purpose in the exercise was the testing of Abraham

This talmudic passage begins by dealing with the issue of the vow It is not difficult to understand why Jephthah's vow was not accepted like the others, for his vow directly involved God, while the others did not The last two parts of the unit touch on some of the major issues of the narrative of Jephthah's daughter, but they do not really

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, p 812

go into any detail. The suggestion is made that Jephthah might have found a way to annul his vow, but the rabbis do not come right out and condemn him or tell the reader how he might have avoided the sacrifice of his daughter. By citing the verse without an explanation and without a comment on the story, they fail to deal with the difficulties that it presents. The final section of the unit clarifies that God was not in any case in favour of human sacrifice, but yet again it does not offer any form of condemnation of Jephthah.

The rabbis were not shy. They said what they felt, and they often made subjective judgements. They also often digressed from the immediate subject to make their points or opinions known. In the case of Jephthah, however, they did not seem to bother. It is difficult to believe that in the entire Talmud they could not find one place to comment on the events of the narrative or on the tragedy of the daughter.

## Midrashim

A wide range of midrashim dating from about 400-500 C. E. to the medieval period discuss the story of Jephthah and his daughter. The datings of the midrashim collections are all very approximate, and the datings of the units of which they are composed are even less certain. Individual passages or midrashic units may be either earlier than the compilation of midrashim into which they were collected or subsequent additions to texts redacted centuries before. All the midrashic treatments will be examined before exploring the medieval Bible exegetes.

### *Genesis Rabbah*

Genesis Rabbah, an exegetical midrash, dates from around the fifth century C. E.

and is approximately contemporary with the PT. In the course of the text's transmission, it underwent much redaction with passages both added and omitted.<sup>6</sup> While the exegesis in this text follows a verse by verse sequence of Genesis, like most rabbinic texts it tends to digress, and therefore, it is not uncommon to find in it discussions, comments, and interpretations of other biblical events and characters that are not directly related to this first book of the Torah.

The first passage in Gen R that discusses Jephthah is 60:14.<sup>7</sup> Similar to the excerpt from the BT discussed above, this unit mentions four biblical characters who vowed inappropriately. In addition to Eliezer and Saul, Caleb was dealt with favourably, Jephthah was not.<sup>8</sup> The rabbis again attribute to God His disapproval in the imprecise nature of these four vows. In Jephthah's case, God's worry about what Jephthah might be forced to sacrifice is put into more concrete terms. It is no longer that Jephthah might offer *something* unclean and not permitted for sacrifice, but rather God says: "Had a camel or an ass or a dog come forth, you would have offered it up for a burnt-offering."<sup>9</sup> This reference to specific unclean animals that God would spurn as offerings is

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<sup>6</sup>For more information on Genesis Rabbah see H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), pp. 300-308.

<sup>7</sup>*Midrash Breishit Rabba*, vol. 2, ed. by J. Theodor and H. Albeck, (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), p. 641-644.

<sup>8</sup>Caleb vowed, "And I will give my daughter Ahsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath-sepher" (Judg. 1:12). The rabbis point out that Caleb might have been forced to marry his daughter to a slave. But God chose for him Othniel. The content and problem with Caleb's vow is not unlike that of Saul, who also promised his daughter in marriage to whoever killed Goliath, *ibid.* p. 641.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 642.

reminiscent of Pseudo-Philo's *Bib Ant*, which includes God's disapproval of Jephthah's vow and His concern for the nature of the sacrifice right into the flow of the narrative<sup>9</sup>

The rabbis present the fault in Jephthah's vow, God's disapproval, and the outcome of the vow interspersed with verses from the narrative. The unit then appears to digress to a full discussion of what Jephthah did. A disagreement is put forth on the issue of what Jephthah could have done to annul his vow and salvage his daughter's life. R Yohanan claims that he could have redeemed her with money by paying her value to the sanctuary, but Resh Lakish says that he was not required to do even that<sup>10</sup>. He cites a teaching in Mishnah Temurah 27b that states the following

If he says concerning an unclean animal or a blemished dedicated animal, "Behold these shall be a burnt-offering," he has said nothing. If he says, "Behold these shall be *for* (italics added) a burnt-offering," they are sold and the burnt-offering is bought with their money.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the daughter could not be a burnt-offering. A human is not considered "a clean animal" that can be sacrificed to God, and so whether Jephthah specified "for a burnt-offering" in his vow or not, by virtue of the fact that she was considered an unclean "animal," he would not be obligated to sacrifice her. The vow was either invalid just in its recitation, or he could exchange the object of the vow for money to fulfill it.

Having determined that Jephthah in fact should have been able to annul his vow

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<sup>9</sup>See pages 27-28

<sup>10</sup>*Midrash Breishit Rabba*, pp. 642-643

<sup>11</sup>Translation from *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Kodashim*, vol. 4, trans. by I. Epstein, (London: The Soncino Press, 1948), p. 200



and refrain from sacrificing his daughter, the rabbis suggest why he did not do so. Assuming that Pinhas was High Priest at the time and had the ability to absolve Jephthah of his vow, the rabbis recount that both leaders were stubborn. Pinhas said that Jephthah needed him, so why should the High Priest seek out "an ignoramus" (as he calls him). Likewise Jephthah said that he is chief of Israel's leaders, so why should he go to Pinhas. Stubborn pride gets in the way of a young woman's life, and the midrashic unit concludes "Between the two of them, the young girl died."<sup>12</sup>

The discussion of Jephthah ends with references to the deaths of Jephthah and Pinhas. The rabbis explain certain irregularities in the account of their respective deaths in the verses of the Bible as referring to this story they have told.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the mistakes that were made by both Jephthah and Pinhas, regarding Jephthah's daughter, did not go unnoticed, although they may not be explicit in the text.

In the case of Jephthah, the rabbis explain that, as a result of not having tried to annul his vow and save his daughter, Jephthah died by his limbs falling off one by one. This is learned from the verse in which the reader is told that "Jephthah was buried in the cities of Gilead" (12:7).<sup>14</sup> The plural of "cities" indicates that he was buried in more than one location, and so each time a limb fell off, it was buried in that particular place. Pinhas, on the other hand, was punished by losing his divine inspiration. This is learned from I Chron. 9:20, which says "And Pinhas son of Eleazar was the chief officer over

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<sup>12</sup>*Midrash Breishit Rabba*, p. 643

<sup>13</sup>*Midrash Breishit Rabba*, pp. 643-644

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*

them, in the past, the Lord was with him."<sup>15</sup> The rabbis understand the obvious past tense of this verse to mean that he was deprived of this privilege because he did not swallow his pride and help Jephthah to annul his vow.

This midrashic unit is an expansion on the excerpt from the BT. It is obvious that the rabbis do not approve of what Jephthah did and believe that he could have found a way out of his vow. Unlike the Talmud, this unit does not simply present a verse that implies that Jephthah could have avoided the fulfillment of his vow, rather it discusses outright how he might have done so. Mild sympathy is demonstrated for the daughter, who in the eyes of the rabbis died unnecessarily. This is certainly a recognition that a tragedy has occurred. The rabbis also notice that, according to the surface reading of the Bible, Jephthah does not appear to suffer for the death of his daughter. They search deeper for nuances that may suggest that Jephthah did not go unpunished. Their solution may not be realistic, but it does show, more importantly, that they were aware of the implications of what Jephthah had done and of the many questions that have gone unanswered in the biblical text.

The second passage that mentions Jephthah in Gen R is 70:3.<sup>16</sup> It is presented in the context of the vow Jacob makes to God (Gen 28:20-22), and again mentions four who made vows. This time, however, the nature of the vow is not the issue, and four other characters are mentioned: Israel (the people) and Hannah, who profited from their vows.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, p. 800

<sup>17</sup>See Num. 21:2 f. and I Sam. 1:11-20

and Jephthah and Jacob who vowed and lost. The midrashic unit does not go into any more detail than the listing of these four characters. Jephthah's vow is obviously problematic and so it often appears in connection with other vows that have negative outcomes, like Jacob's, it was superfluous. As related in 11:29, the spirit of the Lord already rested upon Jephthah, and so his vow was unnecessary to ensure a successful battle, likewise, God had already promised Jacob to protect him and to remain with him always (Gen. 28:13-15), and therefore, Jacob's vow was unnecessary.

The two midrashic units of Genesis Rabbah serve as the basis for many of the midrashim that will follow, as well as many of the medieval and modern exegeses.

### *Leviticus Rabbah*

Leviticus Rabbah and Genesis Rabbah share a similar language and much of the same material. Lev. R. is a homiletical midrashic text on the book of Leviticus and clearly of Palestinian origin. This is determined by the language, the preference of Palestinian rabbis, the geographic references, and the halakhah. Like Genesis Rabbah, the redaction of Leviticus Rabbah is said to have occurred in the fifth century C. E. with subsequent revisions in the centuries that followed.<sup>18</sup>

The one reference to Jephthah in Leviticus Rabbah is 37:4.<sup>19</sup> Again one finds the presentation of four individuals who vowed inappropriately: Eliezer, Saul, Caleb, and

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<sup>18</sup>Strack and Stemberger, pp. 313-317.

<sup>19</sup>*Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevuar, Vayikra Rabbah*, vol. 2, ed. by Hevrei Makhon ha-Midrash ha-Mevuar, (Jerusalem: Makhon ha-Midrash ha-Mevuar, 1992), pp. 463-466.

Jephthah<sup>20</sup> Next follows the stubbornness of Pinhas and Jephthah, their shared responsibility for the daughter's death, and the punishments they received<sup>21</sup> The unit ends with the discussion of R Yohanan and Resh Lakish and why Jephthah did not have to sacrifice his daughter, despite his vow, Resh Lakish also applies a number of verses from Psalms that strengthen his point<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis and position of the rabbis in this unit is the same as that in Genesis Rabbah Here, the final two units are reversed as compared to Genesis Rabbah, but perhaps this was done in order to end the passage with the verses cited from Psalms Otherwise, the same discussion presented in relation to Genesis Rabbah is applicable here and there is no need for a repetition of the analysis

### *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*

Ecclesiastes Rabbah, also known as *Midrash Qohelet*, is suggested to have originated in eighth century Palestine The first printed edition appeared in Pesaro in 1519, and earlier manuscripts are available in both Oxford and Jerusalem The text consists of a verse by verse commentary on Ecclesiastes that leaves few verses unexplained, and the author, it appears, drew heavily from earlier midrashim (including Gen R and Lev R ) and from the PT<sup>23</sup>

Ecclesiastes Rabbah contains two references to Jephthah In the first, the rabbis

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<sup>20</sup>*Ibid* , pp 463-464

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid* , p 465

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid* , p 465-466

<sup>23</sup>Strack and Stemberger, pp 345-6

understand Ecc 4 17 to be referring to Jephthah <sup>24</sup>

Guard your foot when you will go to the House of God, it is more reasonable to obey than the fools' offering of a sacrifice, for they know nothing [but] to do evil

The rabbis explain regarding the final clause of the verse, "for they know nothing [but] to do wrong," that

the fool does not know how to distinguish between the various kinds of vows. From where do we learn this? From the instance of Jephthah <sup>25</sup>

The rabbis refer to Jephthah as a fool for not knowing that his vow regarding a human was invalid. Again, however, the comment stops short. Why does the text not expand upon what Jephthah did? Why does it not elaborate on Jephthah's foolishness and the consequences of his actions? The rabbis are not usually miserly with their words and their opinions. The reader gets a sense of the rabbis' feelings towards Jephthah, but nothing concrete is expounded. One cannot tell whether the rabbis were unhappy with the fact that Jephthah uttered the vow despite the fact that God had already sided with him, with its ambiguous nature or perhaps with its fulfillment.

The second reference to Jephthah in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* is 10 1<sup>26</sup> and relates to Ecc 10 15, "Labour of the fools wearies him because he does not know how to go to a city." The rabbis divide the verse into two parts and explain that "A fool's exertions tire

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<sup>24</sup>*Midrash Rabbah Hamesh Megillot*, (New York: Ora Publishing, 1946), p. 65a

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid*, translation in consultation with *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, vol. 8, trans. and ed. by H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, (London: Soncino Press, 1961), p. 126

<sup>26</sup>*Midrash Rabbah Hamesh Megillot*, pp. 140a-140b

him out" refers to Jephthah "He doesn't know how to get to a town" is suggestive that Jephthah should have gone to Pinhas to have his vow annulled.<sup>27</sup> The midrashic unit then goes through the narrative expansion on the stubborn pride of Jephthah and Pinhas and the interpretation of their punishments.<sup>28</sup>

The main focus of this reference to Jephthah is obviously that he could have had his vowed annulled and save his daughter's life, but he did not. The death of the daughter and the life that could have been saved are not dwelled upon, for the rabbis, it was sufficient to say that "the poor girl perished and they were both condemned for her blood."<sup>29</sup> The identification of Jephthah as a fool was seen above in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, and the same questions remain. What kind of fool did the rabbis consider him? Was he simply a stupid fool who may act nonsensically but is virtually harmless, or was he an evil fool whose actions transgress commandments and lead to death? If the rabbis believe that Jephthah was simply foolish, but was not really dangerous, then they are ignoring the whole tragedy of the daughter and her brutal death.

#### *Midrash Tanhuma*

The *Tanhuma* dates to the first half of the ninth century, and its place of origin is Palestine. A homiletical midrash on the entire Torah, it exists in two editions, the ordinary one (first printed in 1520/22 in Constantinople) and the Buber edition (Vilna, 1885). For the first two books of the Pentateuch, the two editions of this midrashic text

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, p. 140a

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, p. 140b

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*, translation from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, p. 275

vary greatly, but for the remaining three they are essentially the same. The existence of two editions is probably the result of two different textual recensions, in addition to other later contributions.<sup>30</sup>

The ordinary edition of *Tanhuma* contains a discussion of Jephthah in connection with the commentary on the verse Lev. 27:2<sup>31</sup> "When anyone explicitly vows to the Lord the equivalent for a human being."<sup>32</sup> The midrash begins by applying a verse from Prov. 11:30 "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and one who captures souls is a wiseman." The text understands this verse to be referring to the knowledge of Torah. For one who has Torah within his grasp has everything, including the knowledge of what to do regarding the vow to sacrifice a human being. One who does not know Torah cannot know what to do in such a situation.<sup>33</sup> The text then applies this to Jephthah, who must not have been a *ben torah*,<sup>34</sup> since he lost his daughter, he obviously did not know the laws that allowed him to redeem her for money.<sup>35</sup> *Tanhuma* next interweaves some of the midrashic expansions seen in earlier texts. God was angered by the ambiguous nature of Jephthah's vow because it suggested that he would have been prepared to

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<sup>30</sup>Strack and Stemberger, pp. 329-333.

<sup>31</sup>*Midrash Tanhuma, Sefer Vayikra*, (Williamsburg: Me'ayn ha-Torah, 1963), pp. 138-140.

<sup>32</sup>Translation from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1988), pp. 200-201. The chapter in Leviticus goes on to discuss what each person is worth in shekels that can be redeemed at the sanctuary in exchange for the sacrifice.

<sup>33</sup>*Midrash Tanhuma, Sefer Vayikra*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>34</sup>Literally, "son of the torah," meaning one who knows Torah.

<sup>35</sup>*Midrash Tanhuma, Sefer Vayikra*, p. 139.

sacrifice to God a dog, pig, or camel, animals unsuitable for sacrifice. In that case God sent the daughter out to Jephthah in the hope of reinforcing the laws regarding vows and avoiding further mistakes.

The Tanhuma text continues with the narrative about Jephthah's failure to seek from Pinhas the annulment of the vow, as well as their respective punishments.<sup>36</sup> New to the discussions of the midrashic texts seen so far, Tanhuma provides a conversation between Jephthah and his daughter prior to her sacrifice in which she tries to convince him of the laws and to show him that he is not obligated to carry out the sacrifice. She brings the example of Jacob's vow (Gen 28:20-22), in which he promises to God "of all that You give me, I will give You a tithe," that did not include the sacrifice of his children. Likewise, Hannah vows to dedicate her son to God for all his life, and this too does not entail sacrificing him on the altar (I Sam 1:11).<sup>37</sup> When Jephthah would not listen to his daughter's wisdom, she asked for two months to see if she could find a loophole in the vow that would convince her father to annul it. The Tanhuma text tells the reader that the verse says she wished "to descend upon the mountains," (11:37) and R. Zekharyah explains that *mountains* refers to the Sanhedrin, for she went to them to see if they could help her. His proof is from Micah 6:2, which says "Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord, You firm foundations of the earth! For the Lord has a case against His people, He has a suit against Israel."<sup>38</sup> In this verse *mountains* plays the role of the

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>38</sup>Translation from *Tanakh*, p. 1050



courts, judging God's case against Israel. R. Zekhariah thus applies that meaning to the verse in the Jephthah narrative and suggests that the daughter went to the courts (i.e., the Sanhedrin) for assistance."

Tanhuma continues its discussion of Jephthah and applies to him Prov. 28:3: "A poor man who exploits the wretched is like a torrential rain that leaves no food." Jephthah is the poor man because he is lacking in knowledge of Torah, and he is like a torrential rain because he had someone to annul his vow. "It leaves no food" means that the courts were unproductive in helping him, because God removed from their minds the law that would have allowed them to find the loophole needed to prevent fulfillment of his vow. The midrashic unit then states simply that Jephthah mounted her on the altar and slaughtered her.<sup>39</sup> This of course was not God's desire, and Jer. 7:31 is cited as proof:

And they have built the shrines of Topheth in the Valley of Ben-hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in fire, which I never commanded, and which never came to My mind.

The passage ends with the debate between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish as to whether Jephthah even had to pay his daughter's worth to the sanctuary and with associating the final part of the verse from Jeremiah, "which never came to My mind," with the sacrifice of Mesha, the son of King Moab.<sup>41</sup>

This long midrashic unit on Jephthah consists of a combination of narrative expansion and exegesis. On the one hand, the Tanhuma fills in some of the details of the

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<sup>39</sup>*Midrash Tanhuma*, p. 140.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid*

biblical narrative that help to explain the development of the plot, in addition to elaborating on the characterization of Jephthah and his daughter. on the other, it deals with some of the specific textual difficulties that one would not expect to find in a midrashic digression. The main foci of the passage are the vow, the ability within halakhah to annul it, and the fact that God is not the least interested in human sacrifice.

The unit provides a negative portrayal of Jephthah and a concrete and positive one of his daughter. Jephthah is portrayed as the stubborn fool who insists that he must fulfill his vow as it was stated. The daughter on the other hand has an intelligent voice. It is she who is knowledgeable in the Torah and it is she who knows the laws well enough to try and convince her father of his faulty thinking. For the first time, a midrashic text dealing with this episode actually focuses on the daughter as the victim and does not assume of her complacent obedience.

In addition to much of the new material provided in Tanhuma, one also finds some of the basic discussions related to Jephthah (Pinhas and the debate between the two rabbis, as well as God's annoyance at the ambiguity of the vow). Many verses are cited from the Bible and applied to Jephthah, his vow, and his ignorance of the law, and the unit is quite adamant about God's rejection of human sacrifice. As Genesis Rabbah went one step further than the Talmud in its discussion of Jephthah and in its judgement of his actions, Tanhuma goes further than Genesis Rabbah. The comparison of the daughter's Torah knowledge and her father's offers a clear picture of what the compilers of Tanhuma felt about both of them, and the emphasis on God's rejection of human sacrifice condemns Jephthah's actions. The issue of the daughter's virginity is not mentioned, nor is the

difficulty regarding her position in the family (only child or not), but the text had a specific purpose and direction in its discussion of the vow, and it encompassed the surrounding issues quite completely. Its embellishments of the story may have no basis in the text, but they demonstrate a recognition of the problems in the narrative and the need to remedy them.

The Buber edition of *Tanhuma* is similar to the other one.<sup>42</sup> Jephthah lost his daughter because he was not a *ben torah* and did not know he could annul the vow, and the daughter tried to convince her father otherwise. R. Levi ben Berkhiah, not R. Zekharyah,<sup>43</sup> interpreted "mountains" (11:37) as the Sanhedrin, but the content of the association remains the same.<sup>44</sup> The interchange between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish is absent from this edition, but more of an expansion on God's lament that He has been misunderstood, that His people think He wants them to sacrifice their children to Him, although He has stated the contrary quite clearly is present.<sup>45</sup> In general, this version is slightly shorter than the first one, but the focus remains the same.

### *Yalkut Shimoni*

The *Yalkut Shimoni* is a collection of midrashim on the entire Bible collated from

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<sup>42</sup>*Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. by Solomon Buber, (Jerusalem: Ortsel Ltd., 1964), pp. 112-114.

<sup>43</sup>Among the third generation of Palestinian Amoraim, Strack and Stemberger (1992, p. 98) list a R. Levi who was the father-in-law of Zekharyah. It is however difficult to know if these are the R. Levi ben Berkhiah and the R. Zekharyah mentioned in *Tanhuma*.

<sup>44</sup>*Midrash Tanhuma*, p. 113.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.

more than fifty works. The author is believed to be Shimon ha-Darshan, and the title pages of the various editions suggest that he was from Frankfurt. From the testimony of the oldest manuscript of the work (1307), as well as the writings that are cited within it, the Yalkut is assumed to be a product of the thirteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

The Yalkut is the only midrashic text examined in this study that discusses Jephthah in the context of Judges.<sup>47</sup> This means that, for the first time, the sacrifice and the vow are not part of a digression in a discussion of a verse in the Torah, but part of an anthology of the midrashim collected in the section marked for Judg. 11.

The passage begins with the statement that there were four who made inappropriate vows, but at this point they are not named, and the text moves on, following the direction of the Tanhuma. The issue of Jephthah not being a *ben-torah* is discussed, and Prov. 11:30 is expounded. The conversation between father and daughter where the daughter tries to convince Jephthah of the laws regarding human sacrifice, the exegetical comment by R. Levi ben Berekhiah<sup>48</sup> about the meaning of "mountains" (11:37), the discussion between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish, and the story of Pinhas and Jephthah's stubbornness and their respective punishments are also included. The unit then returns to the four who vowed inappropriately. Unlike the other texts that include this section, the Yalkut begins with Jacob and Jephthah, the two who lost on account of their vows, and then it brings Israel and Hannah, the two who benefitted. The reversal in the Yalkut

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<sup>46</sup>Strack and Stemberger, pp. 383-385.

<sup>47</sup>*Yalkut Shimon: Nevi'im Rishonim ve-Aharonim*, vol. 2, (New York: Title Publishing Co., 1944), p. 710.

<sup>48</sup>R. Levi Ben Berekhiah is the name that is used in the Buber edition of Tanhuma.

can be explained by the fact that in the other texts "the four who vowed" led into a discussion of Jephthah and hence, the passage had to end with him in order for the digression to be smooth and logical. In the Yalkut, the discussion is already centred around Jephthah, so it makes more sense to begin with him and end with the others.

In addition to what has been collected from other texts, the Yalkut suggests that the problems Jephthah had with Ephraim (in chap. 12) and the subsequent civil war were due to the vow he had made and the fact that he sacrificed his daughter. It also condemns Pinhas for having within his power the ability to annul the vow, but for failing to do so. He is then blamed not only for the death of the daughter, but for the deaths of the men of Ephraim who were killed in the war, if he had annulled the vow, none of the subsequent events would have occurred.

Since the Yalkut includes many of the passages from the other midrashim, much of the analysis is also the same. The ambiguity of the vow is acknowledged, Jephthah is portrayed as ignorant and the daughter as intelligent, and the unit generally includes expansions on the biblical narrative and exegesis of a few difficult words and phrases. The additional material relating to the connection between the vow and sacrifice and the subsequent problems with Ephraim may show the need to feel that Jephthah did not go unpunished, that his life was not unaffected by the murder of his daughter. It is worthwhile to point out that Jephthah was the victor in the war with Ephraim, and a successful war seems an unlikely punishment for the murder of one's own child, nonetheless, it is an attempt to demonstrate that the sacrifice of the daughter was not forgotten, but that the effects of the tragedy are evident in ensuing events in the Bible.

This concludes the discussion on midrashic texts that deal with Jephthah, his vow and his daughter. The vow is the main issue in all the texts, and each one expands upon it individually. Conversations and events that the Bible does not relate are included, as well as textual interpretations and rabbinic debates. Many of the problems in the biblical narrative are not dealt with in the midrashim, particularly, the custom that was established, and the issue of the daughter's virginity, and some texts are less complete than others. In general, however, the midrashim attempt to justify the events of the Bible, to show that what Jephthah did was not acceptable, and finally, to render the story somewhat more comprehensible by filling in some of the missing details. With all this, however, the rabbis are still gentle in their condemnation of Jephthah and the sacrifice of his daughter. They seem to suggest that Jephthah simply made an unfortunate mistake from which others should learn. The one additional sentence of the Targum that tells of the law that forbade human sacrifice<sup>49</sup> demonstrates more panic and severity than do some of the lengthy midrashic units.

Jephthah was a problem for the rabbis. He did something horrible that the Bible preferred to ignore in favour of exalting his military prowess, and so the rabbis could not find justification for a harsh condemnation of this successful judge. They focused on his ignorance and the importance of being learned, and the result is a scolding, not for murdering his daughter, but for not knowing better, for not knowing enough Torah to realize that his vow was invalid.

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<sup>49</sup>See above page 22

## Chapter Five - Medieval Bible Exegetes

### Rashi

Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, the best known of all the medieval commentators, is also the earliest Jewish commentator discussed in this study. Referred to by the acronym of his name, Rashi lived from 1040 to 1105 in Troyes, France.<sup>1</sup> France at that time was divided into twelve provinces, Troyes was the capital of Champagne in Northern France. Rashi, who worked as a vinegrower, wrote commentaries on all the books of the Bible except Ezra-Nehemia, Chronicles, and the end of Job,<sup>2</sup> and on the entire Babylonian Talmud except for part of Tractate Baba Batra and Makkot.<sup>3</sup> The organization of Rashi's biblical commentaries follows the sequence of the verses, and difficult phrases and words are interpreted by grammatical explanations, and explained through the use of foreign

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<sup>1</sup>The date of Rashi's birth corresponds to 4800 Anno Mundi. The possibility exists that this date was agreed upon by those who accept 4800 as the year of the death of Gershom ben Judah (Rabbenu Gershom), hence fitting with a common interpretation of Eccl. 1:5 "The sun also rises and the sun goes down." The date of Rashi's death is derived from two sources: a note found in a manuscript called Siddur Rashi (1282 C.E.) and from a reference at the end of a manuscript of Rashi's Torah commentary (1305, Parma Library) stating the following: "Rabbi Isaac of blessed memory, the Frenchman, was taken from us on the fifth day [of the week], the twenty-ninth day of Tammuz 4865, he was sixty-five years of age when he was called to heaven." Isra Shereshevsky, *Rashi: The Man and His World*, (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc., 1982), pp. 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>Moshe Greenberg, *Parshanut ha-Miqra ha-Yehudit*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1983), pp. 74-75. For an argument that the commentary on Job was in fact written by Rashi, see Moshe Sokolow, "Rashi's Commentary on Job: Some Preliminary Observations Towards the Preparation of a Critical Edition," in *Gesher*, vol. 7, (New York: The Student Organization of Yeshiva Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, 1979), pp. 125-134.

<sup>3</sup>Yonah Fraenkel, *Darko shel Rashi be-Ferusho la-Talmud ha-Bavli*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), p. 305.

words and the presentation of relevant midrashim.<sup>4</sup> He regularly mixes peshat and derash, explaining the text while availing himself of the opportunity to provide for his readers passages of rabbinic literature.<sup>5</sup>

Skipping the vow completely, Rashi's first problem with this narrative is the meaning of the phrases *hakhre`a hikhra`im* ("You have brought me low," 11:35) and *hayit be'okhrat* ("You have become my troubler," 11:35).<sup>6</sup> He provides a number of verses with similar forms and moves on.<sup>7</sup> In treating the problematic "descend upon the mountains" (11:37), Rashi associates *yarad* (descend) with the phrase *yored be-vekhi* ("streaming with tears," Is 15:3), and suggests that the meaning is that of lamentation.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the daughter is asking her father for two months to lament upon the mountains, not to descend upon them. In this instance, Rashi does include the midrashic interpretation and says

And in the midrash aggadah, Rabbi Tanhuma expounds [that]  
"upon the mountains" [means] "before the Sanhedrin" [that] maybe  
they could find a loophole to the vow.<sup>9</sup>

He then moves on to verse 38 where he simply points out that *beuleha* should really read

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<sup>4</sup>Greenberg, p. 70, and Edward Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," *Back to the Sources*, ed. by Barry Holtz, (New York: Summit Books, 1984), p. 229.

<sup>5</sup>For more of Rashi's interpretive techniques, in general, see Shereshevsky, pp. 73-118, and Sarah Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>*Miqra'ot Gedolot im 32 Perushim, Nevi'im Rishonim*, (New York: Pardes Publishing House, Inc., 1951), p. 62a-62b.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:35.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:37.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*



*benuloteha*, since the singular is *benulah* and the plural *benulot*.<sup>10</sup> He does not provide an explanation for why the text is written the way it is or what is meant by *benulot*. If the assumption is that the daughter is going to mourn her virginity, why would the term be in the plural, as Rashi is suggesting? In effect, Rashi's "correction" of the text has added one more problem to the narrative.

In his last comments on the narrative, Rashi deals with the custom that was established for the maidens of Israel to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah. The custom is problematic, because the verse (11:39) ends with the statement that a custom was established but does not clarify what it was. Furthermore, there is an inconsistency between the feminine verb and the masculine noun in the phrase *va-tehi hoq* ("and there was a custom"). At first, Rashi explains that the "custom" is referring to a declaration that was made forbidding anyone to behave in such a manner ever again. He then presents a paraphrase of the midrashic unit concerning Jephthah and Pinhas and their respective fates,<sup>11</sup> had Jephthah swallowed his pride and gone to Pinhas, the whole tragedy could have been avoided.<sup>12</sup> The rule hence forbids stubbornness and expression of pride, not child sacrifice. Rashi also suggests the possibility that the custom is expanded upon in the subsequent verse.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the verse that follows the statement of the custom explains what the custom entailed. Rashi does not mention the difficulty of the feminine verb and masculine noun. As a final note, he provides a

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, p. 62b, 11:38

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>12</sup>Gen. R. 60:14, Lev. R. 37:4, and Ecc. R. 10:1

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*

dictionary definition for the word *le-tanot* (11:40) meaning to lament.<sup>14</sup>

It appears as if Rashi is avoiding all the real issues of the narrative. For starters, all the midrashic texts that were examined were focused on the vow, a problematic beginning to the whole narrative. Rashi does not mention anything about it. Since his commentary appears to be directed at the difficult phrases, why does he not comment on *'am lo mimenu* ("he does not have from him," 11:34), a blatantly difficult construction? What Rashi does deal with, the phrase concerning the custom, is one of the few issues that is not dealt with by the midrashim. Rashi may be avoiding repetition for he assumes his readers are aware of the rabbinic writings, however, he does include some of the issues of the midrashic texts, and one would think that a narrative such as this one would elicit a reaction of sorts and perhaps even a need to deal with more than the definitions of difficult phrases. Even without moving away from his goal of writing a *peshat* interpretation of the text, much more depth could have been explored, many other issues explained, and additional phrases with more relevance to the narrative clarified.

### Joseph Kara

Joseph Kara was born around 1060-1070, in the North of France. He was a student and colleague of Rashi,<sup>15</sup> and like his teacher, Kara's main intention in his commentaries was to provide the *peshat* interpretation of the text. However, also like

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*. See Menahem ben Saruq ha-Sephardi, *Mahberet Menahem*, (Jerusalem: Hevrat Me'oreret Yeshaynim, 1854), p. 185.

<sup>15</sup>Gershon Brin, *Mehakrim be-Perusho shel Rabbi Yoseph Kara*, (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1990), p. 11.

Rashi, he often included the midrashic explanations, especially with regard to difficult portions of the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

Kara's commentary on the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is almost identical to that of Rashi's.<sup>17</sup> He also ignores the difficulties of the vow and begins his commentary with the phrase *hayit be'okhrat* ("You have become my troubler," 11:35). Like Rashi, Kara provides other places in the Bible where the same root is utilized.<sup>18</sup> He also presents the Targum, as well as Ps. 55:3 for the interpretation of "descend upon the mountains" (11:37).<sup>19</sup> The Targum translates the phrase as "withdraw upon the mountain," and the verse from Psalms suggests that the root of *ve-yaradeti* (I shall descend) is parallel to *'and*, meaning to wail or lament. For the verse discussing the custom of the Israelite maidens (11:39-40), Kara follows Rashi's second explanation, that the content of the subsequent verse clarifies the nature of the custom.<sup>20</sup>

Like Rashi, Kara appears to avoid all the major issues of the narrative, as if clarifying difficult words and phrases will render the tragedy comprehensible. The sacrifice of the girl is not mentioned, nor is Jephthah's vow. One could argue that these two commentators represent a stage in exegesis when lexicology was the main source of peshat, however, regarding the textual difficulties of the custom that was established, the

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<sup>16</sup>Greenberg, p. 76

<sup>17</sup>*Perush Rabbi Yoseph Kara al Nevi'im Rishonim*, ed. by Shimshon Epenstein, (Jerusalem: Mekor, Ltd., 1972), p. 18

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:35

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:40

commentators discussed above go beyond the meaning of the word to clarify that section of the narrative

## Radak

Rabbi David Kimhi (1160-1235) was born and lived in Narbonne, in the Provence region of France. He was both an exegete and a grammarian, as were his father Joseph and his brother Moses, and he wrote commentaries on Genesis, all of the Former and Latter Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, and Chronicles. Radak sought primarily the literal meaning of the text, following in the steps of Ibn Ezra, in addition to his father and brother.<sup>21</sup> Occasionally he includes rabbinic homilies "in order to draw the reader to his words."<sup>22</sup> His interpretations contain many discussions of biblical style<sup>23</sup> and demonstrate interests in history, religious issues, and anti-Christian polemics.<sup>24</sup>

Radak's commentary on the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is a turning point in the exegesis of this story.<sup>25</sup> Until his commentary, all the interpreters of this passage seem to have accepted the rabbinic position that Jephthah had indeed sacrificed his daughter by slaughtering her on the altar, or at least they did not state anything contrary to this belief. However the Bible text never explicitly states how he fulfilled his vow, it says, "he did to her as he had vowed" (11:39). Citing what he claims to be the

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<sup>21</sup>Greenberg, pp. 89-90

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>23</sup>See Frank Talmage, *David Kimhi - The Man and his Commentaries*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 102-108

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 88-91, and Greenstein, pp. 253-254

<sup>25</sup>*Miqra'ot Gedolot*, p. 62a-62b

interpretation of his father Radak explains that Jephthah did not really murder his daughter but dedicated her to God by secluding her in a house where she remained alone and celibate all her life.<sup>26</sup> He understands this fate right from the problematic vow itself. He writes the following:

"And I will offer it as a burnt-offering" (11:31). The opinion of our rabbis of blessed memory [that Jephthah slaughtered his daughter] is known, and my revered father of blessed memory interpreted that [in the word] *ve-ha'altithu* ("and I will offer it up"), the waw is in place of *o* [meaning "or"], and [he] explained ["whoever comes to greet Jephthah upon his return from battle] will be to the Lord" consecrated, if it is not appropriate as a burnt-offering, **or** "I will offer it up as a burnt offering" if it is appropriate for a burnt-offering."<sup>27</sup>

In order to justify the reading of the conjunction "and" as "or," Radak provides the example of Ex. 21:15, "He who strikes his mother or his father shall be put to death."<sup>28</sup>

The Hebrew contains the conjunction waw between "mother" and "father," but if one kills

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<sup>26</sup>It is worthwhile to note at this point that the Ramban (who lived later than Radak, from 1194-1270) writes in his commentary to Leviticus (27:9) that he rejects Rabbi Abraham's commentary, which suggests that Jephthah did not kill his daughter. Rabbi Abraham, routinely Ibn Ezra in Ramban's commentaries, lived before Radak, from 1089-1164. Moreover, he was a contemporary of Radak's father (1105-1170), whom Radak credits with the interpretation in the first place. Unfortunately, both Ibn Ezra's and Joseph Kimhi's commentaries on Judges are no longer extant, so one cannot know for certain who was the first to derive the variant interpretation. It might be interesting to mention that some confusion exists between Ibn Ezra's commentary on Proverbs and that of Moshe Kimhi. See E. Talmage, *Perushim le-Sefer Mishlei le-Yeiv Kimhi*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), p. xvi-xviii.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, p. 62a, 11:31.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*.

a single parent, he is still deserving of execution. Therefore, in this case too, *waw* can be understood as "or" rather than "and."

Radak expands upon his father's interpretation by demonstrating other signs within the narrative that suggest that Jephthah did not kill his daughter. For example, if the daughter had asked for two months to bewail her soul, one could accept that she is about to die, but the text mentions she bewails her maidenhood, and then after Jephthah fulfilled his vow, the text informs the reader that the daughter had not known a man,<sup>29</sup> the reader is not told that he fulfilled his vow and offered her as burnt-offering. For Radak, this is the *peshat* reading of the narrative. However, he does not fail to perhaps protect himself from outright rejection by saying "The words of our rabbis of blessed memory, if they are acceptable to them, then we must accept them too."<sup>30</sup> Immediately, then, with his first comment on the narrative, Radak has done more for the story than previous commentators. He has not simply glossed over the incident, accepting the interpretations of his predecessors without a distinct opinion of his own. Having established a new atmosphere for the narrative, removing the issue of murder and human sacrifice from the vow, Radak is able to explain some of the other difficulties in the story along the same lines. He reads the text for what it says and not what it implies, explaining how it is possible to understand the narrative without changing the text. For example, regarding the difficulty of *mimenu* ("from him," 11:34), Radak provides the masoretic emendation that it should be read as *mimenah* (from her) and then suggests that Jephthah's wife had

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid* Radak, after having rejected the interpretation of the rabbis, ends by claiming we must accept their view in any case.

other children from her first marriage who lived with her and Jephthah and whom Jephthah considered as his own, but the daughter was the only child "from him," the only one that was truly his <sup>31</sup> Regarding the difficult phrase "descend upon the mountains" (11 37), he provides the traditional understanding meaning to mourn, and then suggests that, since Jephthah lived in Mitzpeh which is located high in the mountains, it is conceivable that the daughter would have to go down in order to wander through the mountains <sup>32</sup> When the text tells the reader that Jephthah "did to her his vow that he had vowed," Radak clarifies again that Jephthah prepared a house for his daughter to remain there all her life "separated from mankind and the ways of the world" <sup>33</sup> He then adds that a law was established in Israel that, from year to year, the young maidens would visit the daughter and comfort and console her, <sup>34</sup> this also explains why we hear no later mention of the practice Radak understands the feminine verb to be referring to an implied feminine noun, that of the "goings" (*halikot*) of the maidens <sup>35</sup> In other words, the custom that was established is what is described in the subsequent verse, that once a year the maidens of Israel would go visit the daughter of Jephthah for four days Radak explains this custom through the Hebrew word "halikot" meaning the "walkings" or the "goings" The implication of this word is intended to clarify the reason for the feminine verb seemingly modifying a masculine noun

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibid*, 11 34

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid*, 11 37

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid*, p 62b, 11 39

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid*, 11 40

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*

The last portion of Radak's interpretation anthologizes the rabbinic commentaries. He provides the Targum's addition to the text, which states that the law that was established prohibited child sacrifice; he cites the debate between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish regarding whether or not Jephthah was obligated to pay his daughter's worth to the sanctuary, and he tells of the stubbornness of both Jephthah and Pinhas. Radak concludes that Jephthah made a mistake in believing that his vow was binding.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout his commentary on this narrative, Radak includes the rabbinic understanding of the text alongside his new interpretations, not once discrediting what past sages have previously explained. In effect, he appears to hide his understanding of the narrative among the many comments of the past, always advising his reader to adhere to the rabbinic interpretations over his. Radak's reading of the text, however, does resolve many of the ambiguities of the narrative, although not without its flaws.

Radak's understanding of Jephthah's vow eliminates any ambiguity as to what Jephthah expected upon return from battle. According to Radak, Jephthah allows for both clean (*tahor*) and unclean (*tame'*) animals as well as humans to come and greet him, and his vow is applicable to all. The emphasis in the narrative on the daughter's virginity and the fact that she had never known a man may be indicative of her ultimate fate. Furthermore, the narrative does not state at any point that Jephthah killed his daughter, and nor does the Bible condemn Jephthah in any manner that might suggest he may have done something wrong. However, it also does not present evidence of women vowed to celibacy, either by themselves or by others. Moreover, if Jephthah was not obligated to

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<sup>30</sup>*Ibid*



kill his daughter, why was his grief so extreme when he saw whom he would have to sacrifice, and if she was to remain secluded her entire life, why did she require two months to bewail her virginity when she would have the rest of her life to do so? In addition, Radak does not discuss the consequences of Jephthah's actions. He might not have killed his daughter, but idealized celibacy was not a common practice among Israelites, so what reaction was there in Israelite society?

Much of what remains ambiguous leads to speculation beyond the text (and there are already plenty of midrashim), but even Radak's attempt at peshat goes beyond the literal. For example, he presents no concrete textual evidence that Jephthah's wife was previously married or that he had other children. While Radak's original interpretation clarifies some of the ambiguities in the narrative, it also leads to more questions.

## Ramban

Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, was born in 1194 in Gerona, Catalonia, in Spain, and died in Israel in 1270. The leading Spanish sage of his generation, he was influential in many areas of scholarship, including exegesis and halakhah. His commentary on the Pentateuch<sup>37</sup> comprises such interpretive techniques as citations from rabbinic writings, explanations of the Aramaic Targum, and consultations of other exegetes.<sup>38</sup> He refers often to Rashi, analyzing his every word, criticizing his midrashic interpretations, and, at

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<sup>37</sup>The comments Ramban made in his Pentateuch commentary to other biblical books have been collected into one edition: *Perushei ha-Ramban al Nevi'im u-Ketuvim Luqat mi-tokh Sifrei ha-Ramban*, ed. by Hayyim Chavel, (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1964).

<sup>38</sup>Greenberg, p. 60.

the same time, stressing his mastery of biblical and talmudic literature.<sup>39</sup> His mention of Ibn Ezra is mostly in the form of harsh criticism for his casual treatment of aggadoth and his too rational interpretations.<sup>40</sup>

In his commentary on Lev 27:29,<sup>41</sup> Ramban discusses the issue of the *herem*, an object that is either consecrated to God and irredeemable or abominable to Him and subject to death. In other words, when one devotes his belongings to God, they become holy and the property of the priests, but when one utters a vow in the time of war to devote his enemy, the intention is not that the captives are to be given to the priests, but that they be destroyed. One who issues a *herem* and does not fulfill it is deserving of the death penalty.<sup>42</sup>

Ramban sees in this law the source of Jephthah's mistake. Jephthah thought that since a *herem* by the chief of Israel in the time of war is sufficient validity to put people to death, he thought that his vow was valid as well, for it was uttered in the time of war and involved the offering of a person. Jephthah did not know that the *herem* was valid only for the destruction of rebels or for those who transgress the commandments of God,

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<sup>39</sup>Bernard Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love', Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban) Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. by Isadore Twersky, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 16.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup>Lev 27:29 - "Any human who has a ban placed upon him cannot be redeemed, he shall be executed."

<sup>42</sup>*Perush ha-Forah le-Rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman*, ed. by Hayyim Chavel, vol. 2, (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1960), p. 193.

for a burnt-offering that is inappropriate to God, it is invalid<sup>43</sup> Ramban then harshly rejects Ibn Ezra's<sup>44</sup> interpretation that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter, but rather secluded her in a house for her to remain there celibate all her life. He states that it is against the Torah to vow to bind a person to live in seclusion, and he abhors the idea of celibacy<sup>45</sup>.

The discussion of Jephthah in Ramban's commentary is in the form of an example that expands upon the issue under discussion. One cannot expect the interpretation of individual textual problems, but in the comment on Jephthah's mistake, no judgement of his mistake is offered, the tone is that of describing an unfortunate event. Chavel writes of the Ramban that

Ethical problems in the biblical stories likely came in for an exhaustive examination. Ramban did not hesitate to be most outspoken in this field. He called attention to the virtues of biblical characters regardless who they were. The failings of others he similarly did not hesitate to discuss<sup>46</sup>.

This does not appear to be the case regarding the character of Jephthah. He neither points out the failings of Jephthah nor the virtues of the daughter. The legal context of the commentary may not have been the appropriate forum to condemn Jephthah and mourn the loss of his daughter, but this aspect of the incident could have received more serious

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<sup>43</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>44</sup>See page 62, note #26

<sup>45</sup>*Perush ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman*, p. 193

<sup>46</sup>Charles B. Chavel, *Ramban: His Life and Teachings*, (New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1960), p. 45

treatment. Some form of comment would be sufficient to assure the reader that the exegete is aware and bothered by the tragedy, even if he does wish to discuss the issue at this point. One cannot overlook the murder that has occurred because of one man's lack of understanding of the law. Intentional or not, Jephthah's error had grave consequences.

### Isaiah ben Mali di Trani

Isaiah ben Mali di Trani, the elder (1200 to 1260), was a contemporary of Ramban. He is known mainly as a halakhist and talmudist, and almost all his writings on the Talmud are still in existence, some in manuscript and some in print.<sup>47</sup> Commentaries on the Former and Latter Prophets and on the Hagiographa (excluding Chronicles) were published under his name, but there are scholars who ascribe these works to his grandson, Isaiah ben Elijah di Trani. Wertheimer, however, claims that Isaiah ben Mali is their author.<sup>48</sup>

Most of Isaiah ben Mali's interpretations seek the literal meaning of the text and are of a philological nature. He pays close attention to discrepancies within the text and he admits that at times the peshat and the interpretations of the rabbis are in disagreement. He also pays close attention to discrepancies in chronology in the Bible. Although he rarely cites them by name, it is apparent from his writings that he was much influenced

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<sup>47</sup>Michael Higger, *Ketaei Halakhah u-Midrash*, (Jerusalem: Meko Publishing, Ltd., 1971), p. 11.

<sup>48</sup>Greenberg, pp. 91-92.

by Rashi and Ibn Ezra<sup>49</sup>

Isaiah di Trani had very little to say about the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter.<sup>50</sup> He deals with only two problems. The first comment concerns the difficult "descend upon the mountains" (11:37). Here Isaiah associates the root of *r-y-d*, meaning to descend, with *r-y-d* meaning to mourn. He claims that the inversion of the *resh* and the *yod* is similar to the inversion of letters in the words *k-h-s* and *k-s-h*, both meaning sheep or lamb.<sup>51</sup> To Isaiah, this metathesis validates the synonymous nature of the words. He also comments on the custom that was established among the Israelite maidens (11:39). He does not mention the textual inconsistency of the feminine verb and masculine noun, but simply states that the custom was to lament Jephthah's daughter every year.<sup>52</sup>

From Isaiah di Trani's commentary, one would not know the story had problems. There is no mention of the vow, or of the sacrifice, or of any other textual problems. Furthermore, what he does comment upon does not produce any new interpretation. He could have easily based his commentary on what Rashi said a century earlier. It is likely Isaiah di Trani was aware of the other writings concerning Jephthah (such as Rashi or the midrashim) and the problems they found in the text, and yet he only found it worthwhile to comment upon two issues.

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<sup>49</sup>*Perush Nevi'im u-Ketuvim le Rabbenu Yeshaya ha-Rishon mi-Trani*, ed. by Avraham Yoseph ben Moshe Wertheimer, (Jerusalem: Ketav ve-Sefer Publishing, 1954), pp. 19-20+30-32.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:37.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:39.

## Levi ben Gershom

Rabbi Levi ben Gershom lived from 1288-1344. He was born in the Provence region of France, although it is not clear exactly where, and he resided mostly in Orange.<sup>33</sup> Very little is known of his family or his life. He was a Bible exegete and a philosopher, as well as a mathematician and an astronomer.<sup>34</sup> There is no evidence that he was a physician as well.<sup>35</sup> He wrote commentaries on almost all the books of the Bible, excluding Lamentations and the Latter Prophets, and many of his commentaries have a common structure. He provides the literal explanations of words and short phrases, which are followed by the meaning of the text as a whole, finally he expounds upon the useful lessons that summarize his main point.<sup>36</sup> His writings generally focus on the philosophical and theological teachings that may be learned from the text, and according to Ralbag, the Torah taught nothing that could not be confirmed by reason.<sup>37</sup>

The commentary on the Former Prophets, is the least philosophical of Ralbag's writings. He dispenses with the structure described above and utilizes a line by line organization of his interpretation of the verses. He focuses on linguistics and semantics

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<sup>33</sup>Seymour Feldman, *Levi ben Gershom, The Wars of the Lord*, vol. 1, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1984), p. 5, and Charles H. Manekin, *The Logic of Gersonides*, (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), p. 10.

<sup>34</sup>Feldman, p. 5, and B. Barry Levy, *Planets, Potions and Parchments*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), p. 29.

<sup>35</sup>Manekin, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup>Feldman, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup>Menahem Marc Kellner, "Rabbi Levi ben Gerson: A Bibliographical Essay," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, vol. 12, (Cincinnati: Library of Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion), 1979, p. 13.

and concludes with useful precepts that can be derived from the unit under scrutiny.<sup>58</sup> Ralbag expands upon Radak's interpretation of Jephthah. He is in full agreement that Jephthah's vow left open the possibility that either an animal or a human may come to greet him when he returned from battle, an animal would be offered as a burnt-offering, and a human would be dedicated to serving God for the remainder of his/her life.<sup>59</sup> Ralbag then goes on to clarify why being dedicated to the service of God requires one to be celibate. Ralbag himself provides the example of Hannah who vowed to dedicate her son to serving God for all his life, and yet one learns in I Sam. 8:1 that Samuel had two sons. Ralbag explains that, if a male had come to greet Jephthah, there would have been no need for seclusion and celibacy, because a man could be married and simultaneously dedicated to God. However, in the case of a woman, her role as a wife is to serve her husband, and therefore she could not be solely in the service of the Lord. For this reason, the daughter had to be separated from society and fated to celibacy in order to perform her duties in the service of God.<sup>60</sup>

Ralbag appears to respond directly to the question regarding Jephthah's intense grief upon seeing his daughter, who according to Radak, he would not be obligated to kill. He explains that Jephthah tore his clothes when he saw his daughter, because his vow prevented her from marrying and having children,<sup>61</sup> important components of achieving womanhood. Like Radak, Ralbag explains that the custom that was established involved

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<sup>58</sup>Feldman, p. 15

<sup>59</sup>*Miqra'ot Gedolot im 32 Perushim*, p. 62a, 11-31

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid*

the maidens of Israel visiting the daughter of Jephthah for four days every year. Otherwise, she remained completely isolated.<sup>62</sup>

Many of the same problems with Radak's interpretation are still present in Ralbag's expansion. He does explain why the daughter had to remain celibate, but one still does not know if this was a common practice at the time, or how it was received. Obviously, Ralbag cannot truly know the answers to these problems, but the fact that the questions persist, with no other evidence in the Bible of women vowed to celibacy, is potentially significant. Moreover, if Jephthah's daughter was consecrated to spending her entire life in the service of God, one would think this pious woman would not be forgotten after the nine verses in Judg. 11. Furthermore, unlike the midrashim and the exegetes that believe Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter, Ralbag does not discuss the legitimacy of Jephthah's vow. According to him, what Jephthah vowed and what he carried out was apparently legitimate. So again one can ask how he knew it was legitimate if there is no other evidence to support celibacy. And if Ralbag does not approve of what Jephthah did, why did he not say so?

A concern for the general level of difficulty of the story is not present in Ralbag's commentary. He avoids dealing directly with the narrative by responding to and expanding upon Radak's interpretation. However, whether Jephthah killed his daughter or sentenced her to live her life as a nun, the story is not understood any better. The reader still leaves the narrative with an unsettling feeling of incomprehension that the commentators have not succeeded or perhaps not even attempted to relieve.

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<sup>62</sup>*Ibid*



## Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel

Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel was born in 1437 in Lisbon and he died in Venice in 1508. He descended from a high-ranking, influential family in Portugal, and even in the entire Iberian Peninsula.<sup>63</sup> He was educated in the traditional texts of Judaism as well as in classical literature, Christian writings and Jewish religious philosophy. Like his father, Abarbanel served in the royal court of King Alfonso V of Portugal and for the length of this king's reign he was financially and politically successful.<sup>64</sup> With the ascension to throne of Alfonso's successor, Joao II, an atmosphere of conflict in Portugal forced Abarbanel to flee to Castile.<sup>65</sup> In 1492 he worked to obtain a revocation of the edict expelling the Jews from Spain but was unsuccessful and left for Naples. He then travelled from Naples to Messina to Corfu to Monopoli and then finally to Venice. He served in various royal courts in addition to writing his Bible commentaries and philosophical works.<sup>66</sup> These commentaries - on the Pentateuch, the Major and Minor Prophets and the Book of Daniel are characterized by their lengthiness, their repetition and their digressions, and at the beginning of each book, Abarbanel presents an introduction in which he lists the difficulties that will be encountered, each chapter is prefaced with a summary of its contents, and an attempt to solve some of the problems

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<sup>63</sup>B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid*, p. 35.

<sup>66</sup>See Ephraim Shmueli, *Don Yitshak Abarbanel ve-Gerush Sepharad*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1963).

mentioned in the introduction <sup>67</sup>

In his commentary on Jephthah, Abarbanel presents both understandings of the vow 1) that Jephthah did not consider the fact that a human may come to greet him, and to his despair (and according to the rabbis) he sacrificed his daughter on the altar or 2) that he allowed for either circumstance in his vow and he secluded his daughter in a house to live out her life in isolation. Abarbanel prefers the second understanding of the vow (that of Radak), and he feels it can be proven from the literal meaning of the text <sup>68</sup>

For the difficult *mimenu* ("from him," 11:34), Abarbanel interprets the phrase as does Radak, that Jephthah's wife had children from a previous marriage, but this daughter was truly Jephthah's. Abarbanel adds that the reason Jephthah tore his clothes and demonstrated such grief was because the daughter was his only child <sup>69</sup>

Regarding the phrase "descend upon the mountains" (11:37), Abarbanel does not choose either explanation presented by earlier exegetes that the root means also to mourn, or as Radak suggested, that their house was in Mitzpeh which is located high in the mountains. Rather he paraphrases the text, explaining that the daughter simply went to wander in the mountains because she soon would not be free to do so. She also goes to choose a sight for her isolation. It is from this story, Abarbanel believes, that the Christians learned to establish convents for their women <sup>70</sup>. There is no obvious evidence

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<sup>67</sup>Greenberg, p. 96

<sup>68</sup>Isaac Abarbanel, *Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim*, (Jerusalem: Sefarim Torah ve-Da'at, 1955), p. 130

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid*

for this, nor for the interpretations presented above. It may seem likely, if Jephthah's daughter is to remain in seclusion, that while she is wandering the mountains she may pick a location for her new home, but one cannot determine this from the text.

Abarbanel's proof that the daughter was put in seclusion and not sacrificed consists of the juxtaposition of the two phrases "he did to her his vow that he had vowed" and "and she did not know a man" (11:39). He claims that the placing of these two phrases side by side suggests that the fulfillment of the vow was that the daughter would not know a man.<sup>71</sup> One could argue, however, that if Jephthah had killed his daughter, she also would not have known a man. This detail might have been included because of the narrator's desire to emphasize the scope of the tragedy by stressing the daughter's young age and the fact that she had not yet experienced all the events of womanhood.

Abarbanel makes an interesting point regarding the custom that was established. Like Radak, he understands the law to consist of the maidens visiting the daughter and comforting her. He supports this explanation by saying that there is no mention in the text that this custom lasted for many generations. Therefore, it makes sense that the custom should have lasted only for the duration of the daughter's life. Abarbanel feels that this presentation is the *peshat* (literal) understanding of the text. However, he concludes his interpretation with the midrashim of R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish's debate and the stubbornness of Jephthah and Pinhas.<sup>72</sup>

Abarbanel's interpretation of the Jephthah narrative includes many of the

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

explanations of previous exegetes and midrashim. He does not deal with many of the textual difficulties, but he does make an attempt to fit all the clues of the narrative together to form one coherent story. There is still no comment on Jephthah's actions, the reaction to his daughter's celibacy, or the daughter as a victim. The connection of this event with later nuns of Christianity is an interesting association, but with no substantial proof. Radak interpreted the text in this fashion and Abarbanel followed suit. The Church Fathers believed as did the rabbis that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, so this could not have been their source for the justification of convents.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, if this had been the case, Jephthah's daughter would have become a better known and more exalted biblical personality, if not generally, then at least in Christianity.

### Moshe Alshekh

Moshe Alshekh was born and educated in Greece. He settled in the Safed community in Israel and travelled to different Jewish communities of the world appealing for financial aid for Safed.<sup>72</sup> He was a rabbi, a Bible commentator, as well as a prominent halakhist and teacher. He died circa 1593. His Bible commentaries are sermons organized around individual books of the Bible. He was very influenced by Isaac Abarbanel and, like him, often began his commentary with the questions and difficulties of the particular section under discussion. He considered the peshat

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<sup>71</sup>C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges*, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970), p. 324.

<sup>72</sup>Shimon Shalem, *Rabbi Moshe Alshekh*, (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1967), pp. 21-22.

interpretation the most important, although he did include derashot in his writings.<sup>75</sup> Alshekh also compiled commentaries on Pirquet Avot and the Passover Haggadah, and 140 of his Responsa were published in Venice in 1605. His derashot on the Prophets were first published in 1803, also in Venice.<sup>76</sup>

Alshekh's commentary on the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter is brief.<sup>77</sup> He recognizes the difficulty in the vow and explains the meaning of the phrase "shall be the Lord's and shall be offered by me as a burnt-offering" (11:31). He says that at the moment of the uttering of the vow, Jephthah dedicates to God the living being that will greet him, and when he will achieve victory, he will offer it as a burnt-offering.<sup>78</sup> Alshekh does not say whether Jephthah intended an animal or a human being for his sacrifice or whether he had not really considered the effect of what the subject would be. He discusses the masculine ending on the preposition *mimmenu* ("from him," 11:34), and says this may indicate that Jephthah was bringing up an orphan or the son of a friend whom he treats as is his own child, but that the daughter is his only flesh and blood.<sup>79</sup> This comment is reminiscent of Radak's suggestion that Jephthah's first wife had children from a previous marriage, and likewise, it offers a resolution of a grammatical problem.

As his final comment on the narrative, Alshekh understands the description of

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<sup>75</sup>For Alshekh's notion of peshat see, Shalem, pp. 67-84.

<sup>76</sup>"Alshekh, Rabbi Moshe Hayyim," *Ha-Encyclopedia ha-Ivrit*, vol. 3, p. 844.

<sup>77</sup>Rabbi Moshe Alshekh, *Sefer Mar'ot ha-Tovot*, (Brooklyn, New York: Yoseph Weiss, 1979), 11:31.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

Jephthah's grief in a very unique, albeit midrashic fashion. There are three phrases that are used to describe Jephthah's grief. First he tears his clothes and this is understood as something one does over the death of a relative, it is a sign of mourning. Then Jephthah says two things: 1) "You have brought me low," and 2) "You have become my troubler" (11:35). Alshekh explains the double use of the root *kara'* in the phrase *hakre'û hikra'um* ("You have brought me low," 11:35) to imply that Jephthah will be doubly subdued over the death of his daughter.<sup>80</sup> On the one hand, she is his only child and he will be left with no one, on the other, she will "become his troubler" by obligating him to humble himself before Pinhas in order to seek the absolution of the vow. Alshekh also explains that the daughter responds to her father's comment of causing him trouble by not obligating him to seek absolution, by not becoming his troubler. She says, "Father, you have uttered a vow to the Lord, do to me as you have vowed." (11:36)<sup>81</sup>

Alshekh's commentary on Jephthah picks out a few issues and provides explanations. His interpretations do not seem to be based on any well-known commentary of past exegetes or on the midrashim, except for the reference to the legend of Pinhas. The sermons that surrounded these comments may have had more to say about the character of Jephthah, his selfishness and his pride in face of losing his daughter's life, as well as the daughter's willingness to die rather than cause problems for her father. Jephthah's vow and his carelessness in specifying the subject of his offering may also have been expanded upon or applied to a relevant situation. None of this is included

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<sup>80</sup>Alshekh often finds special meaning in the double form of the infinitive absolute. See for example, his comment on Judg. 4:9, *halokh 'elekh*.

<sup>81</sup>Alshekh, 11:36.

Again there is no condemnation of Jephthah's actions, praise of the daughter's heroism towards her imminent death, or comment on the nature of the story as a whole. Alshekh may not have discussed any of these issues in his sermons. If he did not, one would be curious to know why not and what he did discuss in their stead, or if he did discuss them, why they were omitted.

### Samuel ben Abraham Laniado

Samuel Laniado was a Syrian rabbi born in Aleppo and a contemporary of Moshe Alshekh. He became head of the community at Aleppo in 1601, and he died in 1605. He was surnamed ha-Darshan because much of his interpretive activity was devoted to midrashic literature, and he wrote midrashic commentaries on Isaiah, on the Pentateuch, and on the Former Prophets.<sup>82</sup>

Laniado's commentary on the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is found in his work on the Former Prophets entitled *Keli Yakar*, first published in 1603 in Venice. His examination of the text is thorough, discussing problems not considered by previous commentators while continuing to provide the traditional explanations of the midrashim and the interpretations of Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, and Abarbanel. He favours Radak's interpretation of the vow,<sup>83</sup> and agrees with Abarbanel that one can understand *mimenu* ("from him," 11:34) as it stands, with no need to alter the reading of the text.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>"Laniado," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1975, [reprint of 1901 edition]), p. 618.

<sup>83</sup>Shmuel Laniado, *Keli Yakar. Sefer Shoftim*, (Jerusalem: Ha-Rav Ezra Betsari, 1986), p. 273.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 275.

Laniado is the first commentator to note the superfluous nature of the word *ve-raq*, "and only" (11 34). As explained above, when the daughter appears before Jephthah upon his return from battle, the text says "and only she was alone." The additional emphasis of "and only" is unnecessary and awkward. Laniado notes this difficulty, and explains that the added emphasis ensures that the reader has no doubt as to whom Jephthah must sacrifice.<sup>86</sup> In other words, rather than simply stating that the daughter came out alone to greet her father, an important detail the reader may not grasp, the narrator emphasizes this point. In this way the reader realizes on his own that it is the daughter who will be the victim of her father's vow. This added emphasis prolongs the narrative and increases the suspense and the dramatic effect.

Laniado also deals with the seemingly unnecessary repetition of introducing the daughter's speech. Again it was mentioned above that when the daughter responds to her father's grief, the text says, "My father, she said ." (11 36). Then, without any interruption by Jephthah, the narrator breaks her response and before allowing her to continue says again "And she said to her father ." (11 37). Laniado suggests that the daughter first responded to her father in anger, but when she saw his pain she calmed down and began again.<sup>86</sup>

The plural of *neqamot*, "revenges", and the seemingly superfluous use of the preposition *me*, "against"<sup>87</sup> (11 36) in the response of the daughter do not escape the

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<sup>86</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid* , p 277

<sup>87</sup>The preposition *me*, as many prepositions in the Bible, can have numerous meanings



attention of this commentator Jephthah's daughter tells her father that he must fulfill the conditions of his vow, for God has already provided for him the "revenge" "against his enemies, the sons of Ammon" (11:36). Laniado questions whether more than one revenge is being referred to, and whether "enemies" and "sons of Ammon" refer to two different groups, or whether Ammon is meant to identify the "enemies." He explains that Jephthah did in fact have two enemies, the sons of Ammon and the people of Gilead, the latter, his fellow citizens who had initially rejected him.<sup>88</sup> In effect Jephthah was twice vindicated. He succeeded in battle against Ammon, and he succeeded as leader of the people who had considered him an outcast.

Regarding the difficulty of "descend upon the mountains" (11:37), Laniado brings the interpretations of Rashi, Midrash Tanhuma, Radak, and the Targum, and he agrees with Radak that, because their home was in Mizpeh, situated high in the mountains, the daughter had to descend in order to wander among them. He does not agree with the rabbis who suggested that the mountains symbolized the Sanhedrin and that the daughter went to them to seek a way out of the fulfillment of the vow.<sup>89</sup> Laniado also clearly spells out the problem with the phrase *wa-ehi hoq*, "and there was a custom" (11:39), and states that the feminine verb refers to the implied *halikot*, "the goings" of the maidens of Israel to visit the daughter of Jephthah.<sup>90</sup>

Samuel Laniado's commentary on Jephthah's daughter is certainly complete. He

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<sup>88</sup>Laniado, pp. 277-8

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 278

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., pp. 281-2

deals with all the textual issues previously discussed, as well as a number of additional ones. He presents the opinions of his predecessors, and he usually chooses the ones with whom he agrees. However, there is still no real emotional reaction to the story. He does not deal with the death or celibacy of the daughter or the actions and vow of Jephthah. He avoids these by anthologizing previous interpretations that do not deal with these issues either. Laniado obviously recognized the difficult nature of the narrative, evidenced by the fact that he does deal with quite a few problems not discussed previously. His commentary is long, with speculation on problems that exceed the limits of *peshat*. If Laniado had had something to say regarding Jephthah or the tragedy of his daughter, he would have found the space to say it. Once again the commentator hides behind a structure of his commentary that purports to clarify this biblical narrative. Nonetheless, the ambiguities remain and the questions persist.

### Aharon ben Abraham Ibn Hayyim

Aharon Ibn Hayyim was a Sephardi rabbi and commentator originally from Fez. He was born in 1545, and in his lifetime he lived in Egypt and in Venice as well as in Jerusalem, where he died in 1632. Ibn Hayyim wrote commentaries on the Sifra, the Mekhilta, and the Sifrei, and on the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and Song of Songs. His work on the Sifra was considered his major accomplishment, and of his biblical commentaries only his work on Joshua and Judges, entitled *Lev Aharon* was ever published, first appearing in Venice in 1609. In general, Ibn Hayyim favoured the literal interpretation of the texts on which he worked, although at times he did include midrashic

expositions<sup>91</sup>

Ibn Hayyim's commentary on the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter is mostly a reaction to Radak's theory that Jephthah committed his daughter to a life of celibacy as fulfillment of his vow,<sup>92</sup> but he does present a few new issues. Ibn Hayyim begins by admitting that Jephthah's vow is difficult to explain, but he presents a list of seven difficulties with the interpretation of Radak.<sup>93</sup> He first questions Jephthah's expression of grief. He comments that the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" is not incumbent upon the female, so if she is to remain celibate and hence childless she would not be transgressing a divine commandment, and furthermore, she is not going to die. Childless or not she is to remain alive. Secondly, Ibn Hayyim points out that the text never actually states what the fulfillment of the vow entailed. Thirdly, he wonders why celibacy and seclusion are necessary in order to serve God; Ibn Hayyim obviously did not approve of Rabbag's explanation that a woman could not serve God and her husband at the same time. The fourth comment he makes regarding Radak's interpretation is that the pronominal subject *we-hi'*, "and she" (11:39), is superfluous. If the phrase "and she did not know a man" was meant to modify the previous sentence that Jephthah "did to her his vow that he had vowed" (11:34), there would have been no need for the expression of subject. In Hebrew, it is common not to specify the subject of the sentence, for it can be indicated from the person, gender and number of the verb. Essentially, Ibn Hayyim

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<sup>91</sup>Ben-Neim, *Malkeh Rabbanan*, (Jerusalem: Ha-Ma'arav, 1931), pp. 19a-19b

<sup>92</sup>Aharon Ibn Hayyim, *Iev Aharon*, (Jerusalem: Makhon Benai Yissakhar, 1987), pp. 73b-75b

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 73b-74a

is saying that, according to Radak, the verse reads as follows "he did to her his vow that he had vowed, and she did not know a man " This would imply that not knowing a man is indicative of the nature of the fulfillment of the vow However, Ibn Hayyim argues that because of the presence of the stated subject the verse should be read as follows "he did to her his vow that he had vowed, and she did not know a man " This implies that the fact that the daughter did not know a man was an unfortunate consequence of her fate, but not necessarily the clue to what that fate entailed

In his fifth point, Ibn Hayyim does not agree that the feminine verb *wa-tehi*, which precedes the masculine noun *hoq*, refers to the contents of the subsequent verse (11 39) Were the verb meant to refer to what was written in the next verse, Ibn Hayyim feels one could expect a better link Regarding Radak's interpretation of *le-tanot le-vat* (11 40), usually understood as "to mourn *for* the daughter" but explained by Radak to suggest that the maidens of Israel "mourned *with* the daughter of Jephthah" when they visited her once a year, Ibn Hayyim says in his sixth comment that *le-vat* is definitely *for* the daughter and not *with* her Finally, in his last remark, Ibn Hayyim questions why the daughter would ask for two months to bewail her virginity if she was to remain celibate and secluded and hence have her entire life to mourn her fate

In reference to some of the other difficulties of the text, Ibn Hayyim comments that *mimenu* ("from him," 11 34) can be left as it is He does not agree that the text is implying that Jephthah's wife had children from a previous marriage, but perhaps only that the daughter was his favourite, which is obvious from the fact that she came out to greet

him<sup>94</sup> Noting the apparently superfluous *ve-raq* ("and only," 11:34), Ibn Hayyim explains, as did Laniado, that the additional emphasis ensures that the reader has no doubt as to who will be the victim of Jephthah's vow.<sup>95</sup> He also comments upon the repetitive use of the vague image of Jephthah "opening his mouth" (11:35). The substance of the vow and its consequences are never directly stated in the text. Rather the characters skirt the issue referring to "the vow" and "the opened mouth." Ibn Hayyim interprets this narrative style with the explanation that this demonstrates that Jephthah's mouth spoke on its own, that he had little control over what he said.<sup>96</sup>

Ibn Hayyim is very sensitive to the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter. He contemplates the textual difficulties as well as the conceptual problems of the text. He does not simply reject Radak's theory of seclusion in favour of the rabbinic understanding of literal sacrifice, but provides logical reasons why the fate of seclusion and celibacy do not seem likely from evidence in the verses. He does not help the reader to understand what Jephthah's intention was in his vow or the implications of human sacrifice. He excels in his analysis of the narrative, locating all the conceptual problems with Radak's interpretation, but he does not provide a replacement theory. He does not back up the understanding of sacrifice with a list of equal length, supporting and explaining how he came to his conclusion of death.

This concludes the examination of the exegetes of the medieval period. Radak's

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<sup>94</sup>*Ibid*, p. 74b

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid*

innovative interpretation of the story convinced some of the exegetes that Jephthah did not murder his daughter, while most deemed it necessary to include the rabbinic understanding of the text regardless of whether or not they accepted Radak's explanation. In either case, the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is still no better understood. The new interpretations raise new questions, and the issues of interest, the effect and the implications of the fulfillment of Jephthah's vow and the death or celibacy of the daughter, are not discussed. Some interpreters dealt with more of the ambiguities than others. Most followed the pattern of their predecessors. Only individual, non-threatening difficulties were raised and interpreted. The questions and difficulties are no further resolved.

## Chapter Six - Modern Bible Exegeses<sup>1</sup>

### Me'am Lo'ez

Me'am Lo'ez is an eighteenth-century commentary on the Bible begun by Jacob Culi in 1730.<sup>2</sup> Written in Ladino, it is a product of Judeo-Spanish literature and culture. Culi hoped to bring the masses back to the practice of Judaism and the traditional literature after so many had strayed following the fall of the false messiah, Shabbetai Tzvi, in the previous century. Many of them did not know Hebrew and were slowly turning away from religious observance. Culi aimed in his work to popularize rabbinic writings by providing extracts from sources such as the Mishnah and Gemara, the Midrashim, the Zohar, and biblical commentaries and by translating them into the Ladino vernacular. The first volume of his work was published in 1730 in Constantinople and proved to be very popular. Culi died in 1732 just prior to appearance of his commentary on the first part of Exodus, and he also left many unfinished manuscripts on other books. Later writers used these manuscripts as the basis for continuing Culi's work and, for many generations, Me'am Lo'ez was the only literature read by Sephardi Jewish families.<sup>3</sup> The volume on Judges was completed by Isaac Me-'Agrisso, Isaac 'Argo'iti, and

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<sup>1</sup>In H. H. Ben-Sasson's *A History of the Jewish People*, Shmuel Ettinger's section on the modern period begins with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and I have followed this mode. See Shmuel Ettinger, "The Modern Period," *A History of the Jewish People*, ed. by H. H. Ben-Sasson, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 727ff.

<sup>2</sup>The traditional pronunciation of Culi is actually Huli. See Aryeh Kaplan, "Mr Barocas and Me'am Lo'ez," in *Studies in Sephardic Culture*, ed. by Marc Angel, (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc., 1980), pp. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup>"Me'am Lo'ez," *Em'ud*, vol. 11, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., 1972), cols. 1158-1160.

# Menaḥem mi-Trani

Intended as a collection of traditional sources Me'am Lo'ez does not contain much of a new interpretation regarding the narrative of Jephthah's daughter.<sup>4</sup> The work takes the position that his vow was careless and ambiguous and that Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter. Whatever came to greet him, be it animal or person, would be sacrificed as a burnt-offering. Me'am Lo'ez does mention the other commentators who interpret the vow differently.

In reference to the word *yehidah* (11:34), which could signify in the context of the story either that she came to greet her father *alone* or that she was his *only* child, Me'am Lo'ez claims that the word indicates the graveness of the tragedy, for not only is Jephthah about to kill a child he is going to kill his only child.<sup>5</sup> Unlike any of the previous commentators examined in this study, Me'am Lo'ez accepts the emendation of the masoretic note from *mimenu* ("from him," 11:34) to *mimenah* (from her).<sup>6</sup> This improves the reading in only one way if one understands "Jephthah did not have *from her* (his daughter) neither a son or a daughter" to mean grandchildren. In other words the daughter was still a maiden. She had not yet married and borne children, and now she would have to die. However, if one continues to understand the verse in light of the idea that the daughter was Jephthah's only child, the emendation does not help, for *mimenah* has the sense of "from her" and not "besides for her."

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<sup>4</sup>*Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez*, trans by Shmuel Yerushalmi, (Jerusalem "Or Hadash" Publishing, 1973), pp 172-184

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, p 173

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*



Me'am Lo'ez includes in the commentary a number of midrashim discussed above. It presents the discussion between Jephthah and his daughter where the daughter tries to convince her father that he is not obligated to sacrifice her, and she brings the example of Jacob's vow to God and the fact that he did not sacrifice to God any of his twelve sons.<sup>7</sup> It also brings the midrash of three people who made inappropriate vows: Eliezer, Saul, and Jephthah,<sup>8</sup> the debate of R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish, and the story of Jephthah's and Pinhas' stubbornness.<sup>9</sup> Me'am Lo'ez also includes a series of rabbinic exempla concerning rabbis who wished to annul their own vows.<sup>10</sup>

In general, Me'am Lo'ez anthologizes the comments of its predecessors. It presents conflicting opinions, and at times it chooses the one of which it approves. However, unlike ben Hayyim, it does not provide reasons for why it rejects one interpretation over another. There is very little innovation or additional revelation in this commentary. It is important to remember that the purpose was not an additional interpretation on the narrative of Jephthah's daughter but a summary of past sources for those who could not study the original. The work however is not an objective collection of opinions, for the author of Me'am Lo'ez does not remain solely an editor or compiler, he interjects his opinions and comments into the anthology.

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<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, pp 173-174

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, p 174

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, p 178

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, p 178-181

## Moses Landau

Moses Landau (1788-1852) of Prague, a descendent of a rabbinical family, immersed himself in both traditional learning and secular studies, particularly German literature. He was well-known as a printer and publisher, and he established a Hebrew printing press in Prague. He was head of the Prague Jewish community from 1831 until his death, and from 1849, he served on the Prague municipal council. The best known of his works is his German translation of R. Nathan ben Jehiel's talmudic dictionary, *He-Arukh u-Musaf he-Arukh im Ma'aneh Lashon*, (1819-1835)<sup>11</sup>. Landau's comments on Jephthah and his daughter appear in his continuation of Mendelssohn's work on the Bible, the *Biur*<sup>12</sup>. This is a Hebrew commentary that accompanies Mendelssohn's German translation of the Bible. Unable to finish before his death, other scholars continued Mendelssohn's project.

In his comments on the verses of this narrative, Landau presents an anthology of previous interpretations. Regarding the vow, he explains that the rabbis understood *we-ha'alitahu 'olah* (11:31) to mean that the daughter would be sacrificed as a burnt-offering. He adds, however, that other commentators<sup>13</sup> understood the conjunctive *waw* to mean "or" (not "and"), and hence the victim of the vow would be separated from society to spend his/her entire life dedicated to the service of God<sup>14</sup>. In reference to the

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<sup>11</sup>"Landau, Moses," *EncJud*, vol. 10, cols. 1397.

<sup>12</sup>Moshe ha-Levi Landau, *Sefer Shofim*, (Vilna: R. Yosef Reuven ben R. Menahem ben Romm, 1818), pp. 111-114.

<sup>13</sup>I.e. Radak, Ralbag, Abarbanel. Landau, however, does not specify who.

<sup>14</sup>Landau, pp. 111-112.

phrase *ain lo mimenu* (11 34), Landau presents the massoretic suggested emendation to *mimenah* as well as Radak's explanation that Jephthah's wife had children from a previous marriage <sup>15</sup> He brings similar word forms and definitions for the phrases *hakhre'û* *hukhr'atani* ("You have brought me low," 11 35) and *hayit be'okhrat* ("You have become my troubler," 11 35) He also paraphrases the intended meaning of "I opened my mouth," (11 36), that Jephthah did not consider the consequences of his vow when he opened his mouth to utter it <sup>16</sup> For the phrase *wa-tehi hoq* ("And a custom was established," 11 39), Landau cites all the possible interpretations that have been presented so far <sup>17</sup>

Landau's work is a true collection of most of what has been interpreted from the Jephthah narrative He does not identify which explanations he prefers and which ones he rejects, they are all presented objectively

## Malbim

Malbim (acronym for Meir Loeb ben Yehiel Michael) was born in 1809 in Volhynia <sup>18</sup> Throughout his life he travelled much throughout Europe and was known for his uncompromising opposition to Reform <sup>19</sup> He served as rabbi in Leczyca, Kherson, and Mogilev and was persecuted everywhere he went for his position on Reform He died in Kiev in 1879 on his way to serve as rabbi in Kremenchug, Poltava Despite his

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, p 112

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, pp 112-113

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, pp 113-114

<sup>18</sup>Noah Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, (Jerusalem Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1988), p 1

<sup>19</sup>Malbim, Meir Loeb, *Sefer ha-Malbim Me'ah Shanah la-Petrato*, (Bnai Brak Netsah Publishing, 1979), p 17

unpopularity among certain factions of the Jewish community. Malbim's commentaries on the Bible were highly esteemed. In his exegeses, he hoped to weaken the Reformers by strengthening Orthodox Judaism in the knowledge of Hebrew and the interpretation of the Bible according to its plain meaning.<sup>21</sup> His commentary was based on three main principles: 1) that the text of the Torah and the figurative language of the Prophets did not contain any repetition, 2) every word of a sentence had a specific meaning and was not simply a synonymous repetition used for literary purposes, and 3) every statement and every metaphor is replete with importance and substance. Malbim stresses the superiority of the literal interpretation of the text, and in the end of his introduction to his commentary on Joshua, he complains that except for Abarbanel, all the commentators after Radak expound homiletics and ignore the literal interpretations.<sup>22</sup>

The first of Malbim's commentaries to be published was his work on Megillat Esther in 1845. His interpretation of Isaiah was completed two years later, and his commentary on the Torah appeared in 1860. The remainder of his commentaries were published between the years 1866 and 1876.<sup>24</sup> His work on Judges is entitled *Shofot Shofim*, completed in 1866.

Regarding the narrative of Jephthah's daughter, Malbim accepts the interpretation

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<sup>20</sup>Greenberg, p. 132

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, p. 133

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 133-134

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid*, p. 134

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 132-133

of Radak and interprets the vow of Jephthah as he did <sup>25</sup>. Therefore, the outcome of the vow is dependent upon what comes to greet Jephthah and if it is worthy of being sacrificed to God. Regarding the word *yehidah* ("alone" or "only," 11:34), Malbim has an interesting interpretation not previously suggested. He explains that a child is called *yehid* when he is the father's favourite and the most important among the other children. He supports this statement from God's address to Abraham in the narrative of the binding of Isaac where God refers to Isaac as *yehidkha* ("your only one," Gen. 22:2) <sup>26</sup>. In the case of Abraham and Isaac, the reader knows for certain that Isaac was not Abraham's only son, but he was his favourite and the most important.

Malbim does not judge Jephthah in his commentary, he does not praise what he did, nor does he condemn his actions. However, he does explain that vows to God can be annulled, and from the words of the text it appears as if Jephthah wished he could have annulled his vow. The expressions of grief are indicative of this desire <sup>27</sup>. Malbim never actually says that Jephthah made a mistake or that he was perhaps not learned enough to know that his vow involving his daughter was not binding. He also does not cite the infamous midrash on Pinhas and Jephthah, in which both are described as stubborn, explaining why Jephthah did not seek absolution of his vow, although it appeared as if it was something Jephthah wanted to do.

For the first time among any of the commentators examined in this study, Malbim

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<sup>25</sup>Malbim, *Otsar ha-Perushim al Tanakh Miqra'ot Gedolot*, (Tel-Aviv: Mefarsher ha-Tanakh Publishing, [Luntshits, 1866]), p. 62, 11:31.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:34.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 11:35.

blames the daughter for the mistaken sacrifice. He suggests that if the daughter had not responded to Jephthah that he must fulfill his side of the promise because he had already benefitted from the vow (he had won the battle with Ammon). Jephthah might not have sacrificed her. Malbim reiterates however that one can always repent and annul a vow made with God.<sup>28</sup> The blame placed upon the daughter for the outcome of the vow may be an attempt to deal with the lack of reaction to Jephthah's actions. In other words, Jephthah is never condemned for what he did, so it must have been someone else's fault. It is interesting that Malbim would be so quick to blame the daughter for her ultimate fate, and yet at the same time feel that she had sufficient influence upon her father to convince him of his obligations to God. If Jephthah had known the law and the binding nature of his vow, he would have been able to contradict his daughter and not sacrifice her or put her in seclusion.

Regarding the fulfillment of the vow, Malbim suggests that the clue to what the fulfillment entailed is to be found in the subsequent phrase that the daughter had not yet known a man.<sup>29</sup> He does include the rabbinic opinion that Jephthah truly sacrificed his daughter on the altar, but he clearly favours the interpretation of Radak. Again, like other commentators who accepted Radak's understanding of the vow, he does not explain what this celibacy was or how it was acceptable in ancient Israelite society.

Malbim's commentary on Jephthah's daughter has a few interesting innovations, but basically he cites the opinions of Radak and the rabbis. He digresses at times from

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, 11:36

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*, 11:37

the citations of previous exegetes to include his own comments, but he does little to improve what has already been said

### Moshe Tedeschi

Moshe Tedeschi was born in Trieste, Italy, in 1821 and he died there in 1898. His major exegetical work is entitled *Ho'il Moshe* and it is comprised of commentaries on the Former Prophets, Job, Psalms, the five Megillot, Proverbs, the Pentateuch, the Minor Prophets, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. The commentary on the Former Prophets is his earliest work first published in Goritz in 1870, and Chronicles was the last of the collection listed above published in Przemyśl in 1889. He also published a number of other works on homilies and on Hebrew synonyms.<sup>30</sup>

Tedeschi rejects the interpretation that Jephthah's daughter was not sacrificed.<sup>31</sup> He feels that because the rabbis did not demonstrate any doubt as to this understanding of the vow, there is no need to search further. He also suggests that the verses regarding the meaning of the vow are clear.<sup>32</sup> He proposes that the narrator may have limited the details of the story that he included in the biblical rendition due to the difficult nature of the text and the cruelty of the events. He rejects the idea of a woman remaining dedicated to God all her life and unable to marry and have children. Spending one's entire life praying and lamenting, Tedeschi says, is not a custom of Israel and does not

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<sup>30</sup>"Tedeschi, Moses Isaac," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 12, p. 73

<sup>31</sup>Moshe Yitshak Ashkenazi, *Ho'il Moshe, Nevi'im Rishonim*, (Gorizia M. T. ed., 1870), pp. 64-65

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64, 1131

seem plausible<sup>33</sup> Like Ibn Havvim, he questions why the daughter would ask for two months to bewail her maidenhood if she is to remain celibate and would have the rest of her life for mourning. He also feels that Jephthah would not have been as distressed and grieved as he is described, if the daughter were to remain alive. He states as well that it was not uncommon for other nations to sacrifice their children in times of war and hardship<sup>34</sup>. Tedeschi is the first commentator to suggest, albeit not directly, that the incident of Jephthah and his daughter may have incurred as a result of the influence of and interaction with surrounding nations. While most of what Tedeschi has to say regarding the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is similar to what has been suggested in the past, he does begin to take one step forward and to at least acknowledge a world outside that of ancient Israel, a world that practiced different rituals and that held different beliefs. Without stating that Jephthah may have been influenced by other nations or that the practice of child sacrifice may not have been as uncommon as Jews would like to believe of their ancestors, he makes his statement, and the reader is left to ponder the implications. He does not condemn Jephthah for sacrificing his daughter, in fact he abhors the idea that an Israelite daughter could have been sentenced to a life of celibacy, and thus "prefers" the tragedy of child sacrifice<sup>35</sup>. However, Tedeschi ever so briefly touches on an area of investigation that may help to understand the story of Jephthah, the reactions, or lack thereof, to the apparent human sacrifice, and the story as a whole, in its proper religious and social context.

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<sup>33</sup>*Ibid*, p. 65

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*



## Joseph Herman Hertz

Rabbi J H Hertz was born in 1872 in Slovakia. He was the first graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (in New York), and he served as rabbi in both Syracuse, New York, and Johannesburg, South Africa. In 1913, he was appointed chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth, and he held this position until his death in 1946.<sup>36</sup> Hertz was more a political figure in the Jewish community than a Bible exegete, his commentary on Jephthah and his daughter appears in his commentary on the Pentateuch and the Haftorahs first published around 1930<sup>37</sup> and very popular for many decades.

The narrative of Jephthah and his daughter is the *haftorah*<sup>38</sup> for the section of Hukkat (Num 19:2-22:1).<sup>39</sup> Hertz, in his commentary, does not commit to any one interpretation of the text. His style is that of anthologizing what interpretations have been provided regarding the Bible in order that the public may be aware of the traditional sources without studying them directly. His approach is not that unlike *Me'am Lo'ez*, but it is much briefer and less detailed.

He cites in his commentary of Jephthah's daughter both the opinion of Radak and that of the rabbis. He brings the legend of the daughter trying to convince Jephthah that

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<sup>36</sup>Hertz, Joseph Herman, "EncJud, vol. 8, cols 397-398.

<sup>37</sup>J H Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, (London, Soncino Press, 1938).

<sup>38</sup>Supplementary reading from the Prophets or Hagiographa read on the Sabbath and Festivals following the weekly portion of the Torah.

<sup>39</sup>Worthy of mention is the fact that the portion of the narrative of Jephthah read for the *haftorah* (Judg 11:1-33) excludes the incident of the daughter. This may be because the focus was intended to be Jephthah's role as a leader (parallel to Moses' role as leader as described in the corresponding portion of the Pentateuch, Num 19:2-22:1), rather than his personal problems.

the Torah obligates only animal sacrifice and that vows concerning human sacrifice are invalid and the story of the stubbornness of Jephthah and Pinhas. He ends with the following poem cited from Dante's *Paradiso*

Be strong  
To keep your vow, yet be not perverse -  
As Jephthah once, blindly to execute a rash resolve  
Better a man should say, I have done wrong,  
Than keeping an ill vow, he should do worse <sup>40</sup>

Hertz suggests in his commentary that the tragedy of Jephthah's daughter occurred due to the unsettled religious conditions of the period of the Judges. He writes

Whatever interpretation we place upon the tragedy of Jephthah's daughter, his strange unhallowed vow would have been impossible under settled religious conditions, such as preceded and followed the period of the Judges <sup>41</sup>

His citation of Dante is an effort to demonstrate that Jephthah's vow was condemned and criticized in many cultures

The condemnation of Jephthah's vow by the Rabbis has been re-echoed in many tongues and many lands <sup>42</sup>

He interprets the midrash on Pinhas and Jephthah as evidence that "the Rabbis severely blame Jephthah for not having his entirely invalid vow annulled" <sup>43</sup>. In general, however,

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<sup>40</sup>Hertz, p. 667

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid*

Hertz offers little insight into the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter. He presents the best known comments and midrashim made in reference to the infamous vow, and the other difficulties are not mentioned. His comments regarding the religious conditions of the period of the Judges and the severe condemnation of Jephthah on the part of the rabbis are not expanded upon beyond these basic statements.

### Theodor Gaster

Theodor Herzl Gaster was born in London in 1906, and he taught comparative religion at Dropsie College, Philadelphia, as well as in other universities in the United States.<sup>44</sup> His treatment of Jephthah and his daughter is found in his book, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*,<sup>45</sup> a study of comparative folklore and mythology. His approach is obviously very different from the other interpretations reviewed in this study, for he comments on the narrative through the examination of parallel stories from other cultures.

Gaster does not quote the biblical verses in his work, rather he presents a summary of a unit and then presents his material. Regarding Jephthah and his daughter, he begins by summarizing the uttering of the vow, the return from battle and the realization that it is his daughter, his only child, who has come to greet him.<sup>46</sup> He then tells of a number of parallels to this theme of a vow being made to sacrifice a human. Most of the stories focus the subject of the vow on a daughter, but not all, and each independent legend has

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<sup>44</sup>"Gaster, Moses," *EncJud*, vol. 7, cols. 333-334.

<sup>45</sup>Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969), pp. 430-432.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 430.

its unique details. Gaster recounts two Greek versions, and seven from Europe: from Hesse, Germany, Lorraine, Hanover, Tyrol, Lithuania, Sweden, and Denmark. In addition, he recounts an Arabic poem dating before the time of Mohammed that tells how the king of Hira vowed that on a certain day each year he would sacrifice the first person he saw.<sup>47</sup>

In Gaster's second and final unit of the narrative, he tells of the daughter's request for two months to wander in the mountains and bewail her virginity and the custom that was established in Israel for the maidens to lament Jephthah's daughter four days every year.<sup>48</sup> Like the first section, Gaster then tells of similarities in other cultures that may shed some light on the understanding of this story. He recounts the many examples of the ancient custom of "annually bewailing the dead or ousted spirit of fertility during the dry or winter season,"<sup>49</sup> and he provides examples from Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, and more.<sup>50</sup>

Gaster never draws any conclusions from the parallels he cites; he simply presents all the evidence and moves on. Begun with a completely different agenda, his approach as compared to other interpreters of the narrative is unique; he examines the story in its religio-cultural context, suggesting perhaps that the many difficulties in the biblical text are due to the efforts of adapting commonly known legends from culture to culture, often the practices and beliefs did not fit with the particular nation perpetuating the legend.

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*, pp 430-431

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid*, p 431

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid*, p 432

## Yehezkel Kaufmann

Yehezkel Kaufmann was born in 1890 in the Ukraine, and he studied in Odessa and in Switzerland. He settled in Palestine in 1929, and taught Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from 1949 until his death in 1963. His most important work is his eight volume *History of the Religion of Israel* (1937-57).<sup>51</sup> His commentary on the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter appears in his exegetical work on the book of Judges.<sup>52</sup>

Kaufmann combines in his commentaries an examination of the historical context of biblical events and comparative analysis of literatures of other nations with the interpretations of the rabbis and sages of centuries past. He appears to attack the story of Jephthah's daughter with a vengeance suggesting things not dared mentioned before. He suggests that Jephthah failed to express what he really intended in the uttering of his vow.<sup>53</sup> He was rushed, possibly nervous at the impending battle and fumbled out a vow that caused more problems than he could have anticipated. Kaufmann arrives at this conclusion in the following manner. First of all, he argues that Jephthah's vow suggests the intention of a human sacrifice right from the beginning, the wording of his vow is explicit in this sense.<sup>54</sup> He explains that Jephthah's vow was uttered in a state of

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<sup>51</sup>*Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People*, ed. by Leo W. Schwartz, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1956), p. 1.

<sup>52</sup>Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Sefer Shofim*, (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Ltd., 1964), pp. 226-231.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

emergency moments before going to battle. He intended a special kind of sacrifice, one that would ensure a victory against the enemy.<sup>55</sup> If animal sacrifice was a regular occurrence at the time, perhaps it was not fitting for the dire circumstances of the moment. Furthermore, the words *hapa ti* ("to greet me," 11:31) and *mi-dalter beiti* ("from the doors of my house," 11:31) are terms used in reference to people and not to animals.<sup>56</sup> Sacrificial animals do not generally exit from the doors of a house and go to greet their master, the sense of the vow suggests a human. The tragedy was only that it was his daughter who came to greet him and not a servant or a stranger. However, Kaufmann takes note of the fact that the only occurrences of human sacrifice in the Bible is that of the offering of sons. If Jephthah only had one child, his daughter, and the only type of human sacrifice known or "acceptable" in the area at the time was child sacrifice, then it seems likely that Jephthah did intend his daughter for sacrifice.<sup>57</sup> It does not appear likely to Kaufmann that Jephthah would intentionally vow to sacrifice his daughter, and so he concludes that Jephthah was simply anxious and not paying attention to his words. He does not feel that Radak's interpretation is the literal explanation of the text.<sup>58</sup> He presents the suggestion that the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter was developed in order to explain the custom of the girls of Gilead who went to the mountains to lament four days every year.<sup>58</sup> In other words an unexplained ritual was developed into an historical legend that has parallels in myths of other nations.

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<sup>55</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid*, p. 230

It is difficult to say whether Kaufmann is suggesting that the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is a product of fiction developed on the basis of similar legends among other nations. He is simply presenting his readers with the scope of research that has been done on the narrative that goes beyond the rabbinic exegetes and the midrashim. Kaufmann examines the story in its historical context and tries to understand the atmosphere in which the events may have occurred. He does not ignore what has been interpreted by his rabbinic predecessors, but he is also not afraid to contradict them. He is interested in the text for what it says and what it teaches, and he attempts to rationalize the story and to resolve its difficulties without including unsubstantiated speculations.

### Elia Samuele Artom

Elia Artom was born in Turin, Italy in 1887. He attended rabbinical college in Florence, and in 1939 he settled in Palestine. Between 1953 and 1965, Artom returned for part of the year to Italy to teach at the rabbinical schools of Turin and Rome. His major work is his Hebrew commentary on the Bible edited by his close friend and brother-in-law, Umberto Cassuto. Artom died in 1965.<sup>59</sup>

Regarding the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter,<sup>60</sup> Artom, like many modern commentators, does not present any new interpretations. At times he takes a position as to which interpretation constitutes the peshat and he often rewrites the verse to describe its meaning. In other words, he appears to paraphrase the text, although rather than

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<sup>59</sup>"Artom, Elia Samuele," *EncJud*, vol. 3, col. 663.

<sup>60</sup>E. S. Artom, *Torah Nevi'im Ketuvim*, ed. by Yehoshua Orenshtein, (Tel-Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), pp. 47-48.

summarizing he adds in a lot of material not present in the actual verse. Moreover, he rarely cites the source from which he is providing his interpretations. He does not say Rashi explained a particular phrase this way or the rabbis said something else. Most of his comments are presented directly without any form of referencing.

Jephthah's vow, according to Artom, was meant to refer to a human. He explains that the two phrases, "shall be the Lord's" and "shall be offered by me as burnt-offering," (11:31) are synonymous, and that in the period of the Judges the Israelites had assimilated among the Canaanites to the point that Jephthah thought human sacrifice was something God desired.<sup>61</sup> He cites the interpretation of Radak as being the opinion of "our sages of blessed memory."

He presents a variety of interpretations for the difficult *mimenu* ("from him," 11:34), but he seems to believe that the word comes to strengthen "lo" ("him," 11:34) that preceded it.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the phrase "from him" emphasizes the idea that he, Jephthah, did not have other children. He adds to this explanation the suggestion that Jephthah's wife had children from a previous marriage, but he does not say who suggested this interpretation.<sup>63</sup> Like Landau, Artom presents similar word forms and definitions for the phrases *hakhre'a hikhr'atini* ("You have brought me low," 11:35) and *hayit be'okhrat* ("You have become my troubler," 11:35). He often interrupts his pattern of presenting the difficult phrase and the various interpretations to include a brief

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<sup>61</sup>*Ibid*, p. 47

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid*, Radak first suggested this interpretation, and many other exegetes included it in their commentaries.



explanatory summary of the verse. For example, in verse 36 Jephthah's daughter advises her father that he has "opened his mouth to the Lord," and thus, he should do to her as has "come out from his mouth." Artom comments in reference to these circulatory remarks that Jephthah's daughter understood the implications of the vow from the words of her father and she requested of him to fulfill them.<sup>64</sup> Artom presents both possible interpretations of the fulfillment of the vow without any obvious preference for either one.<sup>65</sup>

Artom's style of sometimes presenting many interpretations, sometimes presenting only one, in addition to occasionally citing his references can easily mislead the reader. Few of the issues in this narrative have only one explanation, and little of what Artom says has not been said before. In presenting his commentary, Artom would have done more justice to his own work, if he had clearly separated his interpretations from his predecessors and had given credit where it was due.

### Da'at Miqra' - Yehudah Elişur

*Da'at Miqra'* is a commentary published by Mossad ha-Rav Kook in Jerusalem. The volume on Judges was written by Yehudah Elişur in 1976. The section on Jephthah and his daughter is complete and detailed.<sup>66</sup> Almost every verse has a comment or an explanation, and the interpretations combine rabbinic exegesis with contextual explanations and lexicological definitions. An interesting aspect of *Da'at Miqra'*'s work

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<sup>64</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid*, p. 48

<sup>66</sup>Yehuda Elişur, *Sefer Shoftim*, (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1976), pp. 128-131

on Jephthah's daughter is that it rarely presents more than one interpretation to a particular problem. When one reads the commentary, one is led to believe that the narrative is no more complex than other biblical texts. The commentary presents a sense of authority to the correct understanding of the story without allowing its readers an alternate perspective. In reference to the vow, for example, Elişur divides the components of the verse into small units. He begins with *ve-havah* ("and he shall," 11:31) and explains it to be a conditional response. In other words, this form correctly follows the condition set out in the first part of the vow (in the previous verse). For the double introductory formula of *ha-yose' 'šer yese'* ("whatever comes out," 11:31), he writes that the phrase refers to whatever shall come out to greet Jephthah. He adds that this form is found elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>67</sup> Continuing with his interpretation of the vow, he states that one can speak of an animal "coming to greet" his master, and *mi-dalter* ("from the doors," 11:31) may actually refer to the gates of the city and not the doors of one's house. Elişur appears to be responding to a previous interpretation of this verse, however, he provides no reference and names no one in particular. Like Artom, he feels that the two phrases, "shall be the Lord's" and "shall be offered by me as burnt-offering," (11:31) are synonymous, and thus the victim of the vow, be it human or animal, was meant to be sacrificed as a burnt-offering.<sup>68</sup>

Elişur points out elements of suspense and foreshadowing in the narrative and he consistently provides references of parallel usages and meanings in other places in the Bible.<sup>69</sup> Unlike Artom, he holds the position that Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed on

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<sup>67</sup>E.g. Num. 6:9

<sup>68</sup>Elişur, p. 128

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130

the altar,<sup>70</sup> the alternate interpretation originating with Radak is not even mentioned

### David Marcus

David Marcus is the final scholar to be discussed in this work, and he is presently teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. His book entitled *Jephthah and his Vow* was published in Lubbock, Texas, in 1986.<sup>71</sup> Marcus' work on Jephthah and his daughter encompasses all aspects of its investigation. He begins with a brief review of the literature and research already available on the subject, and his detailed analysis of the text includes lexicological examinations of complicated constructions and commentaries from major rabbinic and medieval commentators as well as both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars of the modern era. Marcus provides all the major arguments for the most significant issues and then, in organized lists, he provides the pros and cons for each argument. He also informs the reader of his opinion as to which interpretation is the better one. For example, on the issue of whether Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed on the altar or secluded in the mountains, Marcus prefers the interpretation of seclusion and celibacy. However, he does not provide any concrete reasons for this preference, and he maintains that the evidence is so ambiguous that both explanations are possible.<sup>72</sup> His main thesis is that

the narrator was an excellent craftsman and stylist, so that those parts of the story which are ambiguous could well have been deliberate on his part. The reader or listener is not meant to know,

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid*, p. 131

<sup>71</sup>David Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow*, (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1986)

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid*, p. 50

nor was it thought necessary for him to know precisely how the action is resolved. In this way the tension is maintained and the suspense is increased.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, Marcus claims that after having examined all the literature, all the commentaries and interpretations, the understanding of this narrative has reached a deadlock, and he argues that the only solution must be that the reader was not meant to comprehend this story. The narrator purposely included all these ambiguities and inconsistencies to ensure that no one would be able to resolve the text. Marcus adds that

the fate of Jephthah's daughter may not have been the chief element in the story at all, but rather Jephthah's rash vow. This suggestion is supported by two facts. First, Jewish tradition mostly referred to the Jephthah story, not so much because of the death of his daughter, nor because of the annual festival, but precisely because of the rashness of Jephthah's vow. Secondly, when one considers that the motif of an individual's not being careful with his speech occurs a number of times in the Book of Judges (as well as in the rest of the Hebrew Bible), it is quite possible that this may have been the main motif in the Jephthah story as well.<sup>74</sup>

Marcus' observations of the narrative of Jephthah's daughter and the accompanying interpretations are correct. The focus in these writings is on Jephthah's vow and not on the daughter, her death, or the custom that was established afterwards. However, it appears too simple to conclude that all these difficulties were meant to be and that, due to the genius of the narrator, students and scholars alike struggle over the meaning of the text. The possibility that the daughter's experience was not intended as the primary focus

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<sup>73</sup>*Ibid*, p. 12

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid*

is evident from the fact that she is nameless and the absence of detail allotted to the event and its aftermath. However, questions to the significance of this event in ancient Israelite culture, the frequency of human sacrifice, and the subsequent exaltation of Jephthah for his military prowess (while his rash vow is forgotten) remain. So while Marcus examines many different aspects of the narrative and actually draws a conclusion from his research, his conclusion still leaves the reader with an uncomfortable feeling. Are we to assume that all ambiguous biblical texts are the result of the creative genius of the narrator, and that the reader was never meant to understand their significance? This seems like too easy a solution for all the problems that trouble the scholars of biblical studies.

## Conclusion

*He who guards his mouth and tongue, guards himself from trouble (Prov. 21:23)*

This verse cited above from Proverbs is a fitting conclusion to this study in two ways. First, had Jephthah been cautious in uttering his vow and specifying his object of sacrifice, or had he not made a vow at all, he might not have offered his daughter as a burnt-offering to God. He was careless in his speech, speaking without considering the consequences, and the result was tragedy, murder, and death.

From a very different perspective, this verse also applies to the commentators on this work who have attempted to explicate the many difficulties of the narrative of Jephthah's daughter. Perhaps overwhelmed by the numerous problems one encounters in this narrative, or perhaps fearful of the conclusions they may have been forced to draw from an in-depth examination of the story, the interpreters of Jephthah's daughter are "guarded" in what they say and in what they address. By remaining aloof and objective, refraining from judging the events of the narrative and its characters, the commentators protect themselves and the Bible from criticism; they guard themselves from the trouble that might ensue should a too radical interpretation be suggested.

It is not my intention to conclude that the commentators of the past two thousand years could have explained the narrative under discussion and resolved all its difficulties had they tried hard enough. But I would suggest that they did not attribute to Jephthah's daughter the importance her story deserved. The passage is short and troublesome, and furthermore, after the event is recounted, it is never mentioned again in the Bible. Jephthah is praised as an exemplary military leader, and the sacrifice of his daughter

vanishes like the memory of a bad dream. One might feel uneasy or apprehensive for a little while, but not long afterwards, the mind occupies itself with more tangible, every day events. The narrative of Jephthah's daughter appeared to have no lasting impact on the Israelite people. Even the supposed custom that was established in the daughter's honour is not mentioned again. So, as did the Bible, the commentators that followed did not concentrate too much of their efforts on this seemingly unimportant event, rampant with textual and conceptual problems. They picked out a few difficult words and phrases, provided definitions, and avoided many of the story's real issues. Although one might be able to explain and rationalize the exegetes' behaviour, one who is attempting to render the sacred text comprehensible to his reader is obligated to address each narrative as it appears. One that is especially difficult should be dealt with more fully, not ignored, and definitely not presented as clear and basic. By not addressing the critical issues of the narrative, the commentators leave the impression that the story is simple and does not require much attention. This however is not the case.

Some attempts at rectifying the narrative and rendering it comprehensible that do not exclude the most crucial issues include those of Pseudo-Philo and some of the modern scholars, such as Kaufmann and Marcus. Pseudo-Philo rewrites the story of Jephthah's daughter, filling in details, developing characters, and assigning the daughter a name. He may not have a textual basis for any of his expansions, but at least there is an indirect recognition of the problems and an attempt to resolve them. Kaufmann and Marcus are also aware of all the problems of the text as well as the commentaries on the narrative. They examine the story with the accompanying interpretations as well as their experience

and knowledge in the modern disciplines of geography, archeology, comparative cultures and religions, and philology and lexicology. These writers and scholars, however, are the exception.

The majority of exegetes discussed above are found to be lacking upon examination of their work on Jephthah's daughter. The first step to understanding a difficult text is finding the questions, without the questions there can be no answers, and many of the commentators do not even begin with the questions. The Talmud and the midrashim, for example, are not meant to be exegetical texts, and therefore, one cannot expect to find in depth textual analysis of all the philological and grammatical difficulties in the relevant narrative. However, the units related to vows are a reasonable forum in which to discuss some of the conceptual problems with the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, and yet the rabbis are lenient with Jephthah. Not usually afraid of condemning the evil, regarding Jephthah's actions the rabbis hold back on their criticism. Was Jephthah considered to be basically a "good guy," and therefore his flaws were not dwelled upon? Could the rabbis have wanted to avoid tarnishing his image as a military hero? They consistently whitewash the characters they consider "good" and condemn those they felt to be "evil,"<sup>1</sup> and these determinations are often independent of the Bible's own apparent attitude. However, they do not seem to be certain about Jephthah. The biblical text presents him as a hero who underwent a great personal tragedy for the sake of Israel's security, yet what he did was unacceptable and does not appear to conform to

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<sup>1</sup>See Z. H. Chajes, *The Student's Guide through the Talmud*, (New York: Phillip Feldheim, Inc., 1960), pp. 162-171.



biblical law (never mind rabbinic law) Jephthah must have been a problem for the rabbis, and they dealt with him reluctantly and hesitantly

Among the medieval commentators, Rashi, Joseph Kara, and Isaiah di Trani do not even present the difficult nature of Jephthah's vow. They remain generally distanced from the narrative almost oblivious to the murder and tragedy that have occurred

Radak's interpretation of the narrative was very influential, as he presented a new understanding of the fulfillment of the vow, differing from the traditional understanding of the rabbis. Looking for a way out of Jephthah's murder of his daughter, many of the commentators after Radak were very happy to accept his position that the daughter was sentenced to a life of celibacy and seclusion, while others adamantly defended the rabbinic understanding that Jephthah sacrificed her on the altar. Many also refused to choose, they would cite both interpretations. One effect of Radak's commentary was to enable the exegetes to fill up their interpretation of the narrative without really dealing with the story at all, they could concern themselves with proving or disproving Radak's theory! Frightening enough, Radak's suggestion was the last "new" interpretation. The commentators after him can be categorized as to whether or not they accepted Radak's interpretation. Very few later exegetes offered anything new regarding this narrative. Both Ralbag and Ibn Havvim's entire commentaries on Jephthah's daughter are a response to Radak's interpretations, and commentators such as Abarbanel and Laniado present anthologies of previous interpretations, adding comments of their own only occasionally

In the modern era works on the Bible appear in many different forms, as the field of Judaic and Biblical Studies expanded to include the use of many other disciplines. The

works on Jephthah's daughter of the nineteenth century, like Me'am Lo'ez and Malbim, still maintain the anthology format, summarizing the literature of their predecessors and reinforcing both the importance of peshat and their loyalty to the rabbinic interpretations. The twentieth century also has its share of anthologies. Hertz and Artom, for example, continue the tradition of presenting the interpretations of the past, and *Da'at Miqra*<sup>2</sup> also has little in the way of new information. This latter work, however, refrains from providing differing interpretations, presenting a type of authoritative commentary on the text. Reading the narrative of Jephthah's daughter with Elisur's explanations,<sup>3</sup> one could not realize that the textual difficulties did not have clear cut, simple answers.

The twentieth century has also produced scholars such as Gaster, Kaufmann, and Marcus who have examined the historical, social and religious impact this event might have had on ancient Israelite culture, trying to determine the likeliness of its historical accuracy and whether or not human sacrifice was a common occurrence. Moreover, the similarity of this narrative with mythical tales in other cultures has also been an area of significant investigation. However, even these scholars have not managed to resolve the text in a manner that satisfies the reader. Gaster provides many parallels to the themes of the narrative of Jephthah's daughter, but he does not draw any conclusions. Kaufmann presents a variety of suggested interpretations in addition to some historical analysis and a brief review of the critical literature on the subject, but even though his interpretations may demonstrate more rationalization of the events, he has no more concrete proof than his predecessors.

The final work discussed in this study, that of David Marcus, is perhaps a fitting

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<sup>2</sup>The author of the Judges volume of *Da'at Miqra*.

if not somewhat ironic way to end, for Marcus' conclusion is that a solution to this complex puzzle never existed and was never meant to be exist. And so, after two thousand years of half-hearted attempts at understanding the narrative, he suggests that there is nothing to understand, the genius who compiled this narrative meant for it to be ambiguous. A conclusion like this does not sit well with the reader who has grasped the degree to which this text is difficult and the numerous textual and conceptual problems contained within it.

The purpose of this study was not to assign to Jephthah's daughter the importance of Sarah or Deborah, nor was it to denigrate the writings of past sages, exegetes, or scholars. Each form of commentary examined has made a valuable contribution to the study of the Bible. However, the biblical text about Jephthah's daughter presents an interesting scenario. Its difficulties should have been an invitation to exegetes to explore vastly different areas of interpretation and yet many writers sidestepped a large percentage of them. The discussions are generally brief and concise with little substance and little insight. What the exegetes were thinking as they composed their commentaries is obviously impossible to know, but one could suggest that the lack of attention given to the narrative of Jephthah's daughter may be due to a combination of the difficult nature of the text and the fact that each commentator's predecessor did not discuss the narrative in any depth. Even the Bible itself rushes through the incident and never mentions it again. So, when a particular interpreter arrived at this passage and tried to account for all its difficulties, he turned to his teachers, the sages of the previous generations, and found that they offered little help, like these sages, he too picked out a few insignificant

points on which to comment and, following what became an almost accepted exegetical tradition, moved on to more important stories. And thus, with the exception of those commentators who concentrated their efforts on philological and grammatical interpretations of the text, the cycle was perpetuated.

In past centuries, some commentators explained the textual difficulties in terms of what lessons the reader could learn from the biblical narrative. In the modern era, non-rabbinic writers examine the Bible for its own sake. They have more investigative disciplines with which to prepare their commentaries, and, in most cases, they interpret the textual difficulties by utilizing the knowledge they have acquired from related fields of research.

In all the approaches to biblical interpretation, the narrative of Jephthah's daughter remains a difficult one. Commentators past and present employed personal methods, skills, and even biases to understand the story, and while each of the more than two dozen exegetes examined above has contributed to the interpretation of the text in his own way, the analysis demonstrates that many of the historical and ethical problems have not been addressed fully, much less solved.

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