

**Lament as Prophetic Ritual of Eschatological Hope:
Reading Jephthah's Daughter in Scripture and Liturgy**

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I first met her on a Thursday in Philadelphia. I was sitting in a chapel, heart lifted up in prayer, when her military leader father clattered onto the scene, making a vow to God and vanquishing his foes with little effort. She entered joyfully, dancing, tambourine in hand. Everything went quickly after that. We were barely introduced, I did not catch her name, before her father began his lamentation, and she her reassurances and negotiations. Quickly she gathered her female companions to wander and mourn her virginity, before she returned, and “he did to her as he had vowed.” The one who introduced us declared our encounter “the word of God,” and I, partly out of habit, and partly bewildered, responded reluctantly “thanks be to God.” All others present promptly forgot her, pretended that she had not traipsed across our liturgical space, demanding attention, but our short interaction had seized me, and I became determined to know this young woman sacrificed to God based upon the promise of a man. My hope in this brief paper is to introduce others to this young, nameless woman, who first sensitized me to the suffering and witness of women in the scriptures. I will offer analysis of her presentation in scripture and in the Catholic lectionary, alongside some hopes for public reflection on her story.

The story of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:34-40) is part of Jephthah's narrative (Judges 11-12:7), the midpoint of the Book of Judges, composed during the Babylonian exile, and grouped by biblical scholars within the Deuteronomistic histories. The exclusive worship of God is the preoccupation of these texts, and unfaithfulness to covenantal faith is tied directly to political decline. Judges is a defense of monarchy, with multiple chapters testifying, before or after accounts of great tragedy, that “in those days Israel had no king” (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 18:31,

19:1, 21:25). The Book of Judges' exilic composition indicates the multi-purpose nature of the book: to justify monarchical rule, to explain the exile, and to inspire hope for restoration.¹

Jephthah's daughter is presented only in relationship to Jephthah in scriptures. He is a Gileadite, cast out of his home because his mother was a prostitute. Years later, when he has proven his military prowess, he is approached to lead his clan against foreign incursion, and agrees to do so. In the midst of this war, Jephthah makes a vow of a burnt offering to God of whatever/whoever emerges from his home on his return in exchange for military victory. It is here that Jephthah's daughter enters the scene: coming out to greet her father she is described as an only child twice, highlighting that she is the sole carrier of the lineage of Jephthah. Jephthah becomes greatly distressed when he realizes that she shall be the offering he makes to God. She acknowledges that the vow cannot be reneged on, and requests time to go to the mountains to mourn her virginity with her companions before the vow is fulfilled – a mourning of her lack of offspring and legacy. Her father acquiesces and after her time in the mountains she returns home and the vow is fulfilled. Jephthah goes on to another military victory, and leadership in Israel.

It is difficult to extrapolate a character sketch of Jephthah's daughter from the six verses in which she is featured. Her status as unmarried virgin suggests that she was young. The two moments of dialogue for her are in 11:36 and 11:37, where she first acknowledges the need to conform to the vow, and then requests a favor to delay the fulfillment of the vow. In this it appears that she has agency and negotiates for herself within the confines of her situation. She gathers her female companions to accompany and mourn alongside her, and after the vow of her father is completed, and she fades from the scene, the writer reminds the reader that there was a

¹ Leslie J. Hoppe, "The Deuteronomistic History," in John J. Collins, *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible*. Revised ed. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 149-150, 156-161; Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 98, 113-117.

custom of the women of Israel spending four days each year “to lament the daughter of Jephthah” (Judges 11:39b-11:40).

One major question among scholars around this text is the repercussions of the vow on her life. The vow suggests that Jephthah’s daughter will be “offered up [...] as a burned offering,” but this is not specified at the time of fulfillment, where it says euphemistically “he did with her according to the vow he had made.” (Judges 11:39) This has led some interpreters to spiritualize the sacrifice by having her father’s vow involve her consecration to temple service², but my interpretation of the text is that within the narrative she is truly made into a human sacrifice, a perceived payment for her father’s military victory. To spiritualize away the senseless violence of this text is to give in to our temptation to deny death and suffering.

Another temptation to soften the narrative is to attempt to give Jephthah’s daughter more agency than she has in the text, portraying her as a spoiled, disrespectful child who wishes to have her own way, or, conversely, having her decisively exit her house first to take the place of another who would be sacrificed.³ The former option offers us a deserving victim, the second a noble, heroic victim, and both reject the discomfort of the senseless violence done to an innocent victim. Neither embraces the true powerful agency of Jephthah’s daughter. She enters the scene as a young woman who is portrayed only in relationship with a man, her father, the reason for her ultimate death. Her only conversation partner is her father, yet she displays amazing agency, mobilizing a community of witnesses to her tragic fate, women who journey with her and mourn her virginity with her. After her death, her lament in the face of tragedy is remembered and commemorated by the women of Israel for generations, who gather no longer to mourn her

² Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter,” *Prooftexts*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (September 1997), 279; 288-289.

³ Reis, “Spoiled Child,” 285-290; Danna Nolan Fewell, “Judges,” in *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Ed. Carol A. Newsom, (London: Louisville, KY.: SPCK; Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 67-77.

virginity, but her, a young woman who through her initiative and drive to call others into community, created a lasting legacy for herself without any offspring of her own. She offers those who hear her story a reminder that memory and witness is an – and perhaps *the* – appropriate response to suffering. Her father mourns her first, then kills her, but at the end of her life and as her legacy, she is embedded into a new relationality, and her father's death-bringing action (Judges 11:39) is swallowed up in the cries of lament of her and her female companions and all their successors through the ages (Judges 11:38; 11:40).

The Book of Judges is meant to illustrate the need for a monarch for Israel, an institution which would ensure covenant faithfulness among the people of Israel. The depravity, death, and destruction that comes from non-adherence to the covenant becomes increasingly obvious as the Book of Judges progresses. Unfortunately, the locus of this destruction becomes the bodies of women. The Book of Judges begins with women in high places of authority and agency in Israel, such as Deborah and Jael (Judges 4-5). Jephthah's daughter, as the first of the women of Israel in the Book to die, and who dies at the hand of her own kin, marks a turning point in the stories of women, which slowly builds in violence until the brutal rape, murder and dismembering of the Levite's concubine, the annihilation of the Benjaminite women in war, and the abduction and forced marriage of the women at the shrine at Shiloh (Judges 19-21). The women of Israel who continue to gather to lament Jephthah's daughter even at the time of the writing of the Book of Judges during the exilic period do not mourn her alone, but all their sisters, mothers, and daughters, and themselves, all who experience in their bodies the oppression of systems which do not conform to God's covenant relationship. They gather to remember the young woman who taught them how to lament, how to come together in communities to resist through lamentation and public action – for although their annual gathering was an exclusively women's ritual, there

was something decisively public about it which warranted its preservation in the inscribed history.

What the women of Israel did was ritual action – liturgy, which comes from *leitourgia* – a public work. Within the Catholic ecclesial context, liturgy is an important locus for scriptural reception and interpretation, as the lectionary is promulgated for the whole Church’s use, particularly in Eucharistic liturgies. Eucharistic liturgies are the public remembrance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the performance of hope in the full coming of God’s reign. Eucharist, by its very nature, demands the drawing in of lived experience and energizes participants for mission in the world. Life and liturgy are profoundly linked.

My interest in Jephthah’s daughter was sparked by hearing her story read at Mass. Every two years, on a Thursday in the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time, Judges 11:29-39a is paired with Matthew 22:1-14.⁴ One major issue with the Catholic lectionary’s presentation of the story of Jephthah’s daughter is that it neglects the verses that complete her story and illustrate her lasting legacy among the women of Israel (Judges 11:39b-11:40), a legacy which is vital to the full understanding of this young woman. Instead, the reading proclaimed by the Church ends with the girl returning from her lament and being executed by her father. To proclaim her death as “the word of God” without the witness of the lament of the women of Israel, whose mourning cannot be anything but political by its collective, public, repeated, ritual nature, is to limit the power of the narrative and obscure the injustice and senselessness of the death of the young woman. To cut short the story is to allow her death to have the last word, rather than her lasting legacy of resistance through communal action and witness. The Eucharistic liturgy itself performs such an act of resistance and witness as it remembers the brutal death and

⁴ Senior, *The Catholic Study Bible*, 1818; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Lectionary 422: August 22, 2013,” <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/082213.cfm>.

transformative resurrection of Jesus, while hoping and living for the reign of God which Jesus proclaimed. Eucharistic liturgy is the perfect place for Jephthah's daughter to be fully remembered.

Although there is not much recourse at this time to change the Church's lectionary, a preacher or educator encountering this text would do well to mention the missing verses within the homiletic context, connecting the memorial of the death of the daughter of Jephthah to the death of Christ, and of many other innocent victims. My mentioning homiletics about this scripture passage of course implies that preachers should feel compelled and empowered to address the dangerous and troubling text, to invite those gathered at liturgy to allow themselves to be disturbed by the senselessness of the young woman's death and invited by the lament she enacts into a different way of proceeding in the world, which does not reject suffering and death, or texts of terror, but wrestles with them to allow all faithful going forth from liturgy to be touched deeply and energized to resist powerfully the forces which put people to death. This is what gathering for Eucharist is about after all.

All over the world women and children continue to experience the violence which Jephthah's daughter and her sisters in the Book of Judges were subjected to, including violence enacted by those in their own families. Those of us in the privileged realm of the academy in the developed world cannot turn away from their (or our) suffering any more than we can turn away from a scriptural text of terror like the narrative of Jephthah's daughter. To reject violence is not to reject hearing about it, or seeing it, but instead to journey to the mountains where those who suffer go to roam – to listen, to lament, to weep, to accompany, to feel, to share, to remember, and be transformed, so that neither those who suffer, nor we, will be alone. That is what

Jephthah's daughter taught the women of Israel, that is what she has taught me, and that is what I hope she can teach the whole Church.