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THE FAILURE OF THE FAMILY IN JUDGES, PART 1: JEPHTHAH

Michael J. Smith

While "the literature on Judges is voluminous," one theme scarcely touched on in studies on this book is the role of the family. Women in Judges are often examined in relative isolation. These women need to be studied, however, not as stand-alone characters, but within the social context of their families. Also male characters in Judges should not be studied in isolation, but should be seen in the cultural setting as husbands, fathers, and leaders at various levels who are responsible to prepare the way for the future of Israel in successive generations.

A serious problem in Israel can be seen in the statement in Judges 2:10 that the generation after Joshua "did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel." As a result of military compromises this new generation "played the harlot after other gods" (v. 17). They lived among the pagan nations "and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods" (3:5–6). The tragic events that followed in the book demonstrate that the absence of godly leadership in the family as well as in the nation resulted in everyone doing what was right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25). Throughout the Book of Judges marriage and the family is a theme that needs to be examined.

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Various explanations have been given for the presence of both major and minor judges within the Book of Judges. Many commentators treat the minor judges as insignificant in the total picture, with some even suggesting that they are included only because a redactor wanted to bring the total number of judges to twelve. More recent work on the "minor judges," however, has found that no difference exists between the "minor" and "major" judges.\(^2\) Hauser concludes that "the categories 'major judge' and 'minor judge' serve no useful function other than to indicate the length and style of the literary traditions in which the memory of these pre-monarchical figures has been preserved."\(^3\) Mullen concurs that the "minor" judges filled the same role as the "major" judges for the narrator.\(^4\) Block writes, "The functional differences between so-called major and minor judges should not be drawn too sharply. The apparent differences derive either from the sources used by the narrator (family chronicles for the minor judges; folk narratives for the deliverer judges) or the individual's significance for the narrator's literary and theological agenda. In either case they are better characterized as 'primary' and 'secondary' judges rather than 'major' and 'minor' respectively."\(^5\) This need to view all the judges as

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2 J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (July 1990): 421. Exum attempts to demonstrate that Jephthah fits within the pattern for both the "major" and "minor" judges. Mullen points out that the distinction between the roles and functions of the "major" and "minor" judges was first made by Albrecht Alt ("The Origins of Israelite Law," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. R. A. Wilson [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968]) and then developed by Martin Noth (*Überlieferungsgeschichte Studien*, 3rd ed. [Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1943; reprint, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967]). "The majority of scholars have followed, to one degree or another, the position elaborated by M. Noth which posits a distinction between the nature of the roles of the 'major' and 'minor' judges based upon the differing narrative styles by which each is presented" (E. Theodore Mullen, "The 'Minor Judges': Some Literary and Historical Considerations," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 [April 1982]: 185).

3 Alan J. Hauser, "The 'Minor Judges'—A Re-Evaluation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (June 1975): 200. Hauser's essay was written to refute Martin Noth's claim that the "major judges" had a completely different function than that of the "minor judges."

4 Mullen, "The 'Minor Judges,'" 201.

5 Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 34–35. He adds, "Given the lengths of their reigns, it is doubtful the individuals named in 10:1–5 and 12:8–15 would have been considered 'minor' by their countrymen" (ibid., 35 n. 61). Tola judged Israel for twenty-three years, Jair for twenty-two years, Ibzan for seven years, Elon for ten, and Abdon for eight.
having the same function is significant when the literary arrange­
ment of Jephthah in the center of the secondary judges is consid­
ered, as discussed later.

The theme of the failure of the family can be seen in various
sections of the book. While the theme is not explicit in every story,
it is often implicit in that parallels are developed that enhance the
theme at a later point.

The two introductions (in 1:1–2:5 and 2:6–3:6) and two epi­
logues (chaps. 17–18 and chaps. 19–21) are bookends with strong
messages on the theme of the failure of the family. The theme is
identified in the double introductions first through a story and then
through an explicit statement of Israel's sin. The story is the good
marriage of Othniel and Achsah, Caleb's daughter, in 1:11–15. The
story is followed by the statements that the generation after
Joshua did not know the Lord and so turned to idols (2:10–11) and
that they disobeyed by marrying Canaanites (3:5). In the first in­
troduction the narrator, as already noted, also spoke of Israel as a
harlot who had left the Lord and pursued other gods (2:17; see also
8:27, 33). At the other end of the book the failure of the family
theme climaxed in the double epilogues with two stories, each of
which began with failures in the home but ultimately resulted in
national impact.

The body of the book as the center of a chiasm contains all the
various family issues with a focal point in Gideon. The first three

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6 This article discusses the role of Jephthah, and the second article in this two­
part series discusses Samson.

7 D. W. Gooding's chiastic arrangement of the book is helpful for the introductions
and epilogues ("The Composition of the Book of Judges," Eretz Israel 16 [1982]:
70–79). However, to balance his chiasm he views Abimelech as one of the judges,
but Abimelech was never said to be a judge; he was a self-made king. Also Gooding
does not take into consideration the secondary judges, and so this results in a
disorted picture of the judges. David A. Dorsey developed this same pattern, adding
far more detail (The Literary Structure of the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker,
1999], 105–20). The body of the book records the cycles of the judge stories that
illustrate Israel's progressive decline. The theme of the failure of the family fits
within the various levels of this chiastic arrangement.

A. Introduction 1: Israel’s Military Compromises (1:1–2:5)
B. Introduction 2: Israel's Religious Compromises (2:6–3:6)
C. The Cycles of the Judge Stories (3:7–16:31)
B’. Epilogue 1: Israel's Religious Failures (chaps. 17–18)
A’. Epilogue 2: Israel’s Moral Failures (chaps. 19–21)

Jay G. Williams, however, has a better arrangement of the judge stories. He
shows the relationship of all the judges, both primary and secondary, with three
judge stories, Othniel (3:7–11), Ehud (3:12–30), and Shamgar (3:31), set the stage for coming stories by providing normative male roles and leadership, with only the beginnings of signs of decline. The story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael (chaps. 4–5) introduces a reversal of roles as Barak failed to step up to the challenge of leadership as the designated judge and thus lost the honor of killing the enemy commander. In his place God used Deborah, a “mother in Israel,” and Jael, a non-Israelite wife, to play key roles in delivering Israel. Judges 5 is unique in that the narrator inserted a psalm of Deborah, in which she taught Israel about the Lord and His victory—something the men should have done. The pro-Israelite women, Deborah and Jael, are contrasted with the mother of Sisera (5:28–30), who provides a Canaanite perspective of men and women that would become a pattern in Israel in the second epilogue.

The story of Gideon (6:1–8:32) observes three generations of a family and is the turning point for major family decline in the book. Gideon struggled to overcome the hesitancy that was typical of Barak and believed God would deliver Israel through him. When victory came, however, he became proud and self-centered, and he returned to his idolatrous roots, taking his children with him. Gideon personally went beyond the prescribed boundaries of marriage and became a polygamist, adding a Canaanite concubine to the harem as well (8:30–31). Gideon demonstrated syncretism in his allegiance and in his lifestyle. He proclaimed that only the Lord should rule over them (vv. 22–23), and yet he lived the kingly lifestyle people asked him to assume. The failure of Gideon to establish normative worship of Yahweh, both in Israel and in his home, along with his accompanying lifestyle, resulted in a murderous, Baal-worshiping son who tried to claim the kingship his father refused as a title. Abimelech (8:33–9:57) was a Baal worshiper like his grandfather Joash. Abimelech’s primary failure, as noted by God, was not his attempt to become a king, but his wickedness against his own family (9:23–24, 56–57).

The story of Jephthah (10:6–12:7), as the center of a chiasm from Gideon to Abdon, presents a strong contrast to them in his actions with his daughter. While the secondary judges were noted for their families, Jephthah was noted for ending his own family

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line through a foolish vow to God. The secondary judges had large families, worked at increasing their families, and saw their influence even to the third generation (12:13–15), but Jephthah ended his line completely in one foolish move. While Jephthah seems to have had a good grasp of Israel’s past and God’s working in and through the nation (11:12–27), he ended his own family line so that there was no one to carry on the faith.

With the final judge, Samson (chaps. 13–16), God set the stage before he was born by personally appearing to his parents and preparing them for his birth. While his parents demonstrated some role reversal, particularly in the spiritual leadership of the family, God had already indicated that He would use women to accomplish His purposes. Manoah’s wife seemed a good choice for the job of raising a Nazirite son.

Samson, however, turned out to be a rebellious son, who operated on the basis of what looked good in his own eyes. If Jephthah failed in providing for a future generation, Samson failed by not even establishing the basis for a family and had no children to carry on his work. Refusing even to consider an Israelite wife, Samson lusted after Philistine women only. This final judge was constantly pursuing the very sin the narrator identified in the first introduction, namely, intermarriage with the Canaanites in the land. In spite of a seeming desire for intimacy Samson viewed women as objects to use, as illustrated in his visit to a prostitute in a place of great danger to himself. In the end a foreign woman, Delilah, acted the part of Jael in bringing down the man who was an enemy to her people. Ironically in this event Samson paralleled the Canaanite commander, Sisera, and died a shameful death.

The stories in the two epilogues (chaps. 17–18 and chaps. 19–21) climax the failure of the family theme by demonstrating how one family’s failure can impact the entire nation. The first failure was between parent and child, Micah and his mother (17:1–13), and the second was marital failure between the Levite and his concubine (chap. 19). The clause “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6; 21:25) indicates that this family failure was common in Israel. People did what seemed right to them rather than obeying God. In the first epilogue a mother who professed to elevate the Lord commissioned her son to make idols for his personal shrine. Micah in turn commissioned his nonpriestly son to become a personal priest for him until another could be found. Through a series of events Micah’s idols became an impetus for worship in northern Israel for hundreds of years (1 Kings 12:25–33; 2 Kings 17:22–23). The narrator’s climactic note was that this center of idol worship was staffed by none other than Moses’
own grandson (Judg. 18:30). The failure of the family was evident in all strata in the nation, even in the family of Moses.

In the second epilogue a Levite's attitude toward his concubine resulted in her death by the hands of homosexual Israelite men in Gibeah, whose original plans involved the Levite himself. After the Levite cut up her body⁹ and sent the parts throughout Israel, the outrage escalated into a full-scale civil war that almost destroyed the tribe of Benjamin. In order to recoup that near loss the men of Israel committed worse crimes of mass murder, mistreating their fellow Israelites and especially their virgin daughters in true Canaanite fashion. Israel's pursuit of wives for Benjamin is reminiscent of the statement of Sisera's mother. At the beginning of the book women were highly prized, as seen in Achsah being an encouragement to Othniel for joining Yahweh's holy war on the Canaanites. When men failed to lead (e.g., Barak), God used available women to help fill the gap (e.g., Deborah). With Gideon, women were collected in a harem so he could live like a king, and concubines were added for pleasure. For Samson, women were used to satisfy his lust, and in the end they turned out to be leaders in foreign nations, subduing Israelite men (e.g., Delilah). Some godly women remained (e.g., Samson's mother); others became syncretistic (e.g., Micah's mother), but throughout the book the welfare of women declined.

The failure of the home to perpetuate a godly heritage is seen in intermarriage, concubinage, polygamy, rebellious children, child sacrifice, gross depreciation of women, homosexuality, rape, mass murder, and kidnapping. When men failed, God raised up women to accomplish His task. The epilogues demonstrate, however, that if the women did not turn syncretic themselves, as did Micah's mother, they became degraded and confined to silence, as was the Levite's concubine. Children could be assets for a continuing positive impact, as seen with the secondary judges, but problems in the parents resulted in problems in the children, as seen in Gideon and Abimelech, or children were eliminated altogether, as seen in Jephthah and his daughter. In every area of the home the family had failed to live out and pass on the faith of Israel. God's grace, patience, and persistence, as seen in the final story of Samson, was all that kept Israel from total self-destruction. To destroy the family would be to destroy Israel.

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⁹ See Judges 1:5–7 for the corresponding Canaanite example of mutilation.
JEPHTHAH AND THE SECONDARY JUDGES

After Gideon the next primary judge in the Book of Judges is Jephthah, whose story has generated much controversy and an extensive amount of literature. Marcus notes that Jephthah's story "has served as an inspiration for the composition of dramas, poems, novels, songs, cantatas, oratorios, and operas. So popular had the story been that in 1948 W. O. Sypherd, a professor of English, was able to compile material sufficient for an entire book documenting where the theme has been used in literature, music, painting, and the allied arts (engraving, sculpture, manuscript illustration, and tapestry). . . . Sypherd has documented over 300 literary works in nearly every modern language, ranging from the time of the middle ages till the late 1940s."¹⁰ Similarly Kramer has examined artwork on Jephthah's daughter, ranging from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries.¹¹ The primary focus in these writings is on whether Jephthah killed his daughter or committed her to a life of service at the tabernacle.


In spite of this narrow focus some have seen the need for viewing the full story of Jephthah in its contextual surroundings. Looking back, Jephthah contrasts with the anti-judge, Abimelech. Abimelech was the son of a concubine, a secondary wife; Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. “Both Abimelech and Jephthah are sons of sexual relationships outside of marital vows. Granted, a concubine had the status of a ‘second wife,’ and the children of such a union were legally recognized. In these narratives, however, both sons of non-familial wives effect serious damage to Israel in opposite ways: Abimelech as anti-Israelite, as enemy; Jephthah as Yahwist, Israelite, friend.”12

Both Abimelech and Jephthah had fathers who were bad examples for them. Gideon raised Abimelech in a setting of religious syncretism, and Gilead produced Jephthah as a result of his immoral passion with a harlot (11:1).13 Both gathered a crowd of “worthless” men, and both left home for another place. Abimelech wanted to rule, but Jephthah was pursued and asked to rule. If Abimelech reacted to what he supposed was a bad attitude toward him, since he was only the son of Gideon’s concubine, Jephthah’s brothers actually acted on that attitude toward him by driving him out of the home (vv. 1–2). Jephthah was the son of their father, but his mother was a prostitute. His half brothers would not allow him to share in the inheritance. And yet the Spirit of Yahweh came on Jephthah (v. 29) just as He had done on Gideon (7:34) and Othniel (3:10).14

JEPHTHAH IN CONTRAST TO THE SECONDARY JUDGES

Jephthah also contrasts with the secondary judges, whose brief stories surround his. Little is said of Tola (10:1–2), although a new


13 See Block, Judges, Ruth, 387.

14 Daniel I. Block cautions against reading this too strongly. “Whereas in the case of Gideon the Spirit is said to have ‘clothed’ . . . the man (6:34), this should not be interpreted too differently from every other instance in which the Spirit is described as having come/rushed upon its object. This expression, reminiscent of Num 24:3[2] (in which case Balaam, the Mesopotamian prophet, experiences the same phenomenon), does not presuppose any particular level of spirituality on the part of the recipient. To the contrary, this divine intrusion into human experience seems to graphically describe YHWH’s arresting of men ill-disposed toward resolving Israel’s problems and his equipping of them for the saving task” (“The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration under Tribal Rule,” in Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration, ed. Avraham Gileadi [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988], 52).
element is added by the narrator who introduced the secondary judges with the statement, “Now after . . . [the new judge] arose and judged Israel” (see also 3:31). Also the narrator added the number of years each judge served, a geographical location, and a place of burial. For the secondary judges there is no statement of personal or national apostasy, no reference to a nation oppressing them, and no reference to Israel’s crying out to God. This new pattern is different in that it is not “stressing heroism and deliverance but stability and continuity and peace.” 15

This new paradigm starts with Tola and continues through Samson, although the primary judges Jephthah and Samson are seen as heroes who delivered their people. 16 Jair (10:3-5) is introduced the same way, but the narrator added this about his family: “He had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities in the land of Gilead that are called Havvoth-jair to this day” (v. 4). Wolf notes that the thirty sons and thirty donkeys demonstrate wealth. “Kings rode donkeys of this kind (Gen 49:10 [11]; Zech 9:9).” 17 Judges 10:4 indicates that Jair was appointing his sons to continue on with his work (cf. 1 Sam. 8:1–2).

Following Jair is Jephthah (Judg. 10:6–12:7), and following Jephthah is Ibzan (12:8–10). The narrator again said something about the family when he wrote that Ibzan “had thirty sons, and thirty daughters whom he gave in marriage outside the family, and he brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons” (12:9). Ibzan’s large family also indicates wealth and polygamy. 18 His interest in expanding his family is seen in his taking in daughters from outside the clan for his sons. 19

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18 Ibid., 459.

The next judge is Elon (12:11-12), who "judged Israel ten years [and] died and was buried." The last secondary judge is Abdon (12:13-15). The narrator again includes material on his family. "He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys; and he judged Israel eight years" (v. 14). Once again there is progress, this time in the recording of future generations. "There has been a steady progression of the generations. Tola built for one generation; Jair for two; Ibzan for two, but with sixty arranged marriages there is certainly the expectation of more; and now with Abdon, the grandchildren have arrived, and he clearly builds for three generations."20

The literary relationship between the secondary judge stories and Jephthah demonstrates the family theme. Webb notes that "it seems that the narrative is on the point of losing its way and that the story of Yahweh's struggle to reclaim Israel from apostasy and dissolution is going to peter out into a mere chronicle of the careers of judges who were so undistinguished that scarcely anything about them could be recalled—a chronicle of trivialities. It's as though both Israel and Yahweh have wearied of the struggle and the conflict between them has resolved itself into a kind of truce in which there is nothing of substance to report."21

Yet this is not the case at all. Gooding limits his comments on the secondary judges to only one lengthy footnote, in which he writes, "It is clear that the minor judges contribute to an important theme that begins with Gideon and proceeds through the remaining judges and on into 1 Samuel. It is the theme of the judge's sons, and their behaviour and whether or not they succeeded their father in office, or sought to establish a dynasty, or became corrupt and brought the office of judge into disrepute, or simply petered out."22

Mullen also sees a relationship here. "The accounts of the 'minor' judges are used to 'frame' and hence draw attention to the critical story of Jephthah (10:6-12:7), which serves as a theological focus in the accounts of the judges. They likewise condense the temporal pace of the narrative, propelling the reader toward the Jephthah account and toward the failure of the judges of this pe-

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period.” Block also states that “sandwiched between 10:1–5 and 12:8–15 the Jephthah narrative is best interpreted in comparison with and in contrast to the notes on the ‘secondary’ governors.”

A chiastic arrangement can be seen in the Book of Judges by noting the numbers given in the accounts of the various judges, from Gideon to Abdon and centering on Jephthah. The numbers follow the order of 70—30/30/30—1—30/30/30—70, where the first “70” refers to the number of children from Gideon (8:30), the first “30/30/30” refers to the sons/donkeys/cities under Jair (10:4), the “1” in the center refers to Jephthah’s single daughter and only child (11:34), the second “30/30/30” refers to the sons/daughters/daughters-in-law of Ibzan (12:9), and the final “70” refers to the sons, grandsons, and donkeys of Abdon (12:14). The chiasm is as follows:

70—The number of Gideon’s children (8:30)
30/30/30—The sons/donkeys/cities under Jair (10:4)
1—The single daughter of Jephthah (11:34)
30/30/30—The sons/daughters/daughters-in-law of Ibzan (12:9)
70—The donkeys for Abdon’s 40 sons and 30 grandsons (12:14)

This chiastic arrangement of numbers makes the story of Jephthah and his daughter a literary focal point. Williams says the story is intended to be viewed in contrast with the secondary judges and Gideon. Starting with Gideon, the narrator began to mention the descendants of the judges. This pattern continues, except for Tola and Elon, who have no children recorded and who are equally placed around the focal point, right through to Abdon, who is opposite Gideon.

There is also a progression in the family relationships through this section of Judges. Gideon had seventy sons, but they were all killed by Abimelech, who eliminated the possibility of their continuing their father’s work. Jair had thirty sons, who seem to have expanded their father’s work in thirty cities. Their thirty donkeys are symbols of their ruling position.

Following Jephthah, Ibzan had thirty sons and thirty daughters. In addition he brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons, thereby expanding his family. But Abdon went further. He

23 Mullen, “The ‘Minor Judges,’” 201.
24 Block, Judges, Ruth, 342.
had forty sons and then thirty grandsons, each one of whom had his own donkey. The influence of Abdon has extended on into the third generation, which parallels the three-generational story of Gideon at the beginning of the chiasm. The story of Jephthah is at the focal point of this chiasm, and the story of Jephthah’s daughter is central in the five-part account. She is his only child; he had no sons (11:34). The story of Jephthah therefore is of strategic importance in the theme of the failure of the family. What this father did with his child is of utmost importance.

THE STORY OF JEPHTHAH

Tsevat observes that the story of Jephthah can be divided into five episodes.26 In the first episode (10:6–16) Yahweh’s anger was again vented at Israel. Once again they did evil and served all the gods of the nations around them. The lengthy list of gods in verse 6 seems to indicate the progression of idolatry, which includes many more gods than in the past (see 2:11; 3:7; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1). God’s anger burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites (10:7).27 After eighteen years of oppression by the Ammonites Israel cried out to the Lord in an admission of their sin.28 God, however, had reached the end of His patience, after delivering Israel many times, and so He told Israel He would no longer deliver them (vv. 11–13). Instead they were to cry out to the gods they had chosen and let them deliver them (v. 14). Israel again admitted their sin and promised to do whatever seemed good to Yahweh, and they prayed, “Please deliver us this day” (v. 15). They put away their foreign gods and served Yahweh, and “He could bear the misery of Israel no longer” (v. 16).29

27 God sold Israel into the hands of two nations, and these two nations were the focus of deliverance for the last two primary judges: (a) Philistines, (b) Ammon, (c) Ammon (Jephthah story), (d) Philistines (Samson story). Boling explains the mention of the two nations by saying that 10:6–16 forms a theological introduction for the remainder of the Book of Judges (Robert G. Boling, Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 193; and Webb, The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading, 162–63).
28 For discussions as to whether this is to be considered a genuine repentance see Robert Polzin, Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part One: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges (New York: Seabury, 1980), 177–78; Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” 421; and Block, Judges, Ruth, 346–47.
29 Many have taken this to mean that God had pity on them in their misery and so changed His mind and reached out to help them. But see Block (Judges, Ruth, 348–49) and Mullen (“The ‘Minor Judges’—A Re-Evaluation,” 198), who indicate
In the second episode (10:17–11:11) the leaders of Gilead needed a leader against Ammon (10:17–18). Jephthah, the man they sought for the job, was the son of a harlot, and when the sons of his father’s wife grew up, they drove Jephthah out of the home, saying that he was not to have any share in their inheritance (11:1–2).\(^3^0\) When the elders of Gilead came to get Jephthah, he reminded them of this (vv. 3–7). They struck a bargain: if they took him back, and Yahweh helped him defeat Ammon, then he would become their head (vv. 8–10).\(^3^5\) They all agreed to the terms and Jephthah “spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah” (v. 11).

In the third episode (vv. 12–28), Jephthah attempted to negotiate with the Ammonites. His argument demonstrated that he had a good grasp of Israelite history, but even more important, he gave credit to “Yahweh, the God of Israel” as the One who gave them the land. The king of Ammon disregarded Jephthah’s message, setting the stage for the war between them (v. 28). Here Jephthah, as a father, seemed ready to pass on his faith to his child. He knew Israel’s history and Yahweh’s role in it.

The fourth episode tells of the vow Jephthah made to God and the impact of that vow on his only child (vv. 29–40). This crucial story is placed between the unsuccessful negotiations with Ammon and the equally unsuccessful negotiations with the men of Ephraim (12:1–6). “This presentation does less to characterize the daughter than to clarify what the daughter represents for the father, and what, consequently, her loss will mean to him.”\(^3^1\) After gathering his forces, Jephthah vowed to Yahweh: “If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace


\(^3^5\) Jephthah was not raised up as Othniel and Ehud were (3:9, 15). Instead the leaders of Gilead convinced him to take the role, and the Spirit of Yahweh came on him later (11:29). To use an outcast like Jephthah and to give Israel a deliverer after His patience had run out was obviously grace on God’s part (Klein, The Triumph of Irony in Judges, 86; and Harvey D. Hartman, “The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges” [Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1992], 263).

\(^3^1\) Fuchs, “Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter,” 119.
from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering” (vv. 30–31).32

This vow was obviously very important to Jephthah. He “had everything to lose if God should fail him; all that he had gained politically would slip from his fingers. If God should abandon him, so would the people.”33 Certainly Jephthah knew that human sacrifice was forbidden in Israel (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31), and “yet Israel’s neighbors—ironically, especially the Ammonites—sacrificed their children and this custom might have influenced Jephthah.”34 Mullen suggests that “on one level, Jephthah the outcast appears a good Yahwist. But the nature of the vow itself serves as a commentary on Jephthah’s relationship to Yahweh. Unwilling to trust that Yahweh is with him, Jephthah attempts to insure his victory via the promise of a burnt offering.”35 Block states that his vow was “outrightly pagan” and that it “arose from a syncretistic religious environment.”36 Such an analysis fits the narrator’s assessment of

32 Walter C. Kaiser Jr. says that Jephthah could have had only people in mind when he made the vow. “What then did Jephthah vow? Some have tried to soften the vow by translating what was vowed as whatever comes out. However, if the Hebrew text intended this neuter idea (which would have allowed for anything including Jephthah’s animals), it should have used a different gender here (neuter in the Hebrew would have been signalled [sic] by the feminine form of the word). Since the masculine form is used, and the verb is to come out, it must refer (as it does in every other context) only to persons and not to animals or anything else” (“Jephthah Did with Her as He Had Vowed,” in Hard Sayings of the Old Testament [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988], 103; italics his). David M. Howard Jr. is more specific regarding the feminine gender required for animals. “That is because things with no specified gender—abstracts or neuters—are expressed in Hebrew by the feminine. . . . ‘Whatever’ is an inclusive form that would fall into this category” (An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books [Chicago: Moody, 1993], 116).


33 Block, Judges, Ruth, 366.
34 Wolf, “Judges,” 455.
36 Block, Judges, Ruth, 367.
Israel in Judges 10:6, and Jephthah was a part of that environment. "Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him."

When Jephthah went to war with Ammon, "the LORD gave them into his hand" (11:32), and Ammon was defeated. When Jephthah returned home, his daughter came out to meet him, celebrating the victory with tambourines and dancing (v. 34). As an expression of horror at seeing his daughter come out of the house, Jephthah tore his clothes and said to her, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot take it back" (v. 35). In an extremely submissive response his daughter responded, "My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon" (v. 36).

Jephthah's daughter asked for two months to go to the mountains with her companions and weep because of her virginity, and Jephthah granted her the request (vv. 37–38). When she returned, "he did to her according to the vow which he had made" (v. 39). After that, it became a custom in Israel for the daughters of Israel to commemorate Jephthah's daughter for four days each year (vv. 39–40).

In the fifth episode of the story (12:1–6) the men of Ephraim confronted Jephthah because he had not asked them to help fight in the battle against Ammon. Jephthah indicated that he had

37 Mieke Bal appropriately asks, "Where is Jephthah's daughter's mother? Where are the mothers who might have protected, or if they could not, have avenged their daughter's sacrifice?" ("Dealing/With/Women: Daughters in the Book of Judges," in The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory, ed. Regina M. Schwartz [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], 34). In an essay about child sacrifice, mentioned by Bal, Ph. Derchain depicts an Egyptian scene in which children are sacrificed from a tower in an effort to prevent a victory by an invading army. The mothers in the picture sit and watch and have no power to stop the sacrifice of their own children ("Les plus ancien témoignages de sacrifice d'enfants chez les sémites occidentaux," Vetus Testamentum 20 [July 1970]: 351–55).

38 Fuchs suggests that the narrator presented the daughter as responsible for her own fate. She went out of the house to her own demise and so the father was not responsible. "By portraying the daughter as coming out to meet her father of her own accord, the verse introducing the daughter establishes that she too is responsible—however innocently and tragically—for her end" ("Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," 121–22). The narrator, however, did not seem to play on that sympathy but left the reader with the clear impression of the foolishness of the father's vow (Block, Judges, Ruth, 373).
called but they did not respond (vv. 1–3). As a result the men of Gilead fought with Ephraim. Using the word “Shibboleth” to detect the men of Ephraim, the men of Gilead caught and killed forty-two thousand Ephraimites (vv. 4–6).

Webb points out that in each of the five episodes, “the power of the spoken word is a key motif.” In the first episode Israel spoke, telling God that they had sinned and asking Him to deliver them. God also spoke, but He was exasperated with Israel. In the second episode Jephthah confronted the elders of Gilead, asking why they hated him but had now come to him for help. In the third episode Jephthah gave a speech to the Ammonites, but they did not respond favorably. In the fourth episode Jephthah said to his daughter, “I have given my word [lit., ‘opened my mouth’] to the LORD” (11:35). His daughter responded, “You have given your word [lit., ‘opened your mouth’] to the LORD; do to me as you have said [lit., ‘whatever has gone out of your mouth’]” (v. 36). In the fifth episode the spoken word was “Shibboleth,” and if it were mispronounced as “Sibboleth,” it announced a death penalty on the speaker. Jephthah, whose name means “He opens,” was good at opening his mouth and speaking.

“The end of this story shows Jephthah trapped by his ambitious words. Despite their intensity and impact on the story world, Jephthah’s words throughout the story never quite produce the desired effect. On the contrary his long “diplomatic” speech to the Ammonites (vv. 14–27) was not heeded (v. 28) and in fact produced an effect opposite to its ostensible purpose. His vow (vv. 30–31) granted him victory, but cost him the life of his only child. In this final episode involving Jephthah’s conflict with the Ephraimites (12:1–6), the test of pronunciation “sibboleth” versus “shibboleth” throws further into relief the power of language to shape the world. Here a single word, not unlike Jephthah’s vow, became a matter of life or death. Just as his vow led to the destruction of his own family, here his words led to the destruction of fellow Israelites.”

40 Ibid.
This theme of the spoken word connects all the episodes in the story, and in those episodes there is a downward progression. In the first episode Israel attempted to use words to get God to deliver them (10:10, 15), but God did not respond until Israel acted on their words (v. 16). In the second episode Jephthah used words to bargain with the Gileadites for what he wanted, to be taken back into the clan and to be given leadership (11:9). In the third episode Jephthah's words did not convince the Ammonites and they went to war. In the fourth episode Jephthah's vow to Yahweh ended in disaster for both himself and his daughter. In the fifth episode the wrong word resulted in death for the Ephraimites.

ANALYSIS OF THE JEPHTHAH STORY

Why is the story of Jephthah’s daughter included and placed between the war on Ammon and the war with Ephraim? The answer relates to the family theme and the previously discussed placement of the Jephthah story in the focal point of the chiasm from Gideon to Abdon. Many have noticed that the story of Jephthah and his daughter has parallels to the story of Abraham offering Isaac in Genesis 22. Römer, for example, makes this point.

It has often been observed that the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter is closely linked to the Aqedah story in Genesis 22. In both cases the offering is a בְּנוֹ (Gen. 22:2; Judg. 11:30) and the victim is presented as his or her father’s “only” בֵּן (Gen. 22:2; רָדָם, Judg. 11:34) child. Parallel to Abraham calling “my son” (Gen. 22:7) we have Jephthah’s exclamation “my daughter” (Judg. 11:35). There is also quite an ironical correspondence between Abraham’s confidence that God will “see” the victim for the sacrifice (Gen. 22:8) and Jephthah seeing his daughter who is thereby designated as to be offered to God (Judg. 11:35). Both stories have an outcome related to the issue of the offspring of the father. After an animal is substituted for Isaac, God promises to Abraham that he will have countless descendants (Gen. 22:17), whereas Jephthah’s daughter disappears without having known a man (Judg. 11:39).

Although the outcome of the Abraham-Isaac story is known, many ask what happened in the end with the Jephthah-daughter story. The narrator simply wrote that Jephthah “did to her according to the vow which he had made” (11:39). Although the most obvious implication of that statement is that he offered his daugh-

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ter as a sacrifice, some have proposed that he committed her to
service, as a virgin, at the tabernacle for the rest of her life.43
Römer makes this appropriate point: "Killed or dedicated to a di-
vinity the girl will disappear as a 'virgin' and will not enter into the
genealogy of her family."44 Whichever solution is taken, the result
is that Jephthah ended all hope he had for any posterity. Jephthah
sentenced his own lineage to death.45

Abraham's hope for posterity was linked to his son Isaac, but
Jephthah's hope was linked to his daughter. Abraham wanted
God's will to be done and he received what he hoped for; Jephthah
wanted his own position, which he gained, but he lost all hope for
any future family. The very literary pattern around Jephthah
seems to bear out this family theme, and the tremendous loss fol-
lowing Jephthah's foolish vow. The numbers that the narrator used
in the accounts of the secondary judges enhance the impact of the
contrast. "The severity of Jephthah's sacrifice is emphasized by the
framing stories of Jair, who had thirty sons (10:4); Ibzan, who had
thirty sons and thirty daughters (12:9); and Abdon, who had forty
sons and thirty grandsons (12:14). While these notations of off-
spring tend to draw attention to the obvious wealth and prosperity
of these three judges, they also highlight and emphasize
Jephthah's sacrifice of his solitary offspring."46 Either way—
whether Jephthah sacrificed his daughter or he committed her to

43 Kaiser writes that until the Middle Ages most writers concluded that Jephthah
offered up his daughter as a sacrifice. Later, "commentators began to look for ways
to soften Jephthah's roguishness" ("Jephthah Did with Her as He Had Vowed," 101).
For discussions of the two possibilities see Marcus, Jephthah and His Vow; J.
Cheryl Exum, "Review of Jephthah and His Vow, by David Marcus," Journal of
Biblical Literature 107 (September 1988): 515–17; Irving Francis Wood and Elihu
Grant, The Bible as Literature: An Introduction (New York: Abingdon, 1914),
288–95; Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of
in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 85.
Lindsey notes that "most of the arguments for or against Jephthah's offering his
daughter as a human sacrifice can be used to defend either position and therefore
are not conclusive" (F. Duane Lindsey, "Judges," in The Bible Knowledge Commen-
tary, Old Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor,
1988], 402).

In light of the parallel with Genesis 22 Block suggests that the narrator so-
tened the horrible picture but that the obvious answer is to fit the new characters
into Genesis 22:9–10, without concluding that God stopped the hand of Jephthah
(Block, Judges, Ruth, 374–75).

44 Römer, "Why Would the Deuteronomist Tell about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's
Daughter?" 35.

45 Block, Judges, Ruth, 368.

46 Mullen, "The 'Minor Judges,'" 199.
The emphasis in the text is not the daughter’s death or her service but the fact of her continued virginity. She asked her father if she might go and weep “because of [her] virginity” (11:37, italics added). Jephthah allowed his daughter to go, and she went and wept “on the mountain because of her virginity” (v. 38, italics added). Then after she returned from the mountain, Jephthah did according to his vow, and “she had no relations with a man” (v. 39). Three times the point is made that Jephthah’s daughter was a virgin. Implied in this fact, however, is the greater point that she would not have any offspring, as Kramer notes. “In this episode, the societal importance of bearing a child was clear when Jephthah’s daughter took time to bewail her maidenhood—to mourn the fact she would never have a child. It makes no sense that her virginity is the issue, that she would go off and bewail her virginity, which could be easily rectified. Also, she did not choose to go off in solitude, but rather to solemnize the tragic circumstances with her companions who would offer her compassion and support.” With Jephthah’s daughter’s virginity finalized, there was no possibility of any future offspring, in sharp contrast to the secondary judges listed around them. That realization accounts for Jephthah’s agonizing, self-centered cry (v. 35). “Jephthah quickly realized what he had done; for his daughter was an only child and her death would mean the end of his family line.”

If the judges are pictures of Israel at the time, then Jephthah pictures the self-destruction of the nation, from the family level on

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47 Day notes that נֶפֶרָה, the word used for “virgin” in 11:27–28, refers to “a female who had reached puberty and was therefore potentially fertile, but who had not yet given birth to her first child” (Day, “From the Child Is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter,” 59).

48 Kramer, “Jephthah’s Daughter,” 68.

49 In discussing the term “judge” R. K. Harrison adds that the judges “established no dynasties, and only Jephthah was assured of a continual rule, provided the Ammonites were expelled.” He explains that the judges were all considered a part of the “landed aristocracy,” which even allowed Abimelech and Jephthah to rise to their positions. This possibility of a dynasty then adds to the significance of Jephthah’s sacrifice of his only child (An Introduction to the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 680–81). Jephthah secured some position in Gilead as a result of defeating Ammon. According to the ruling for the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27:1–11; 36:1–12; Josh. 17:3) Jephthah’s property holdings would have gone to his daughter when he died. As it turned out, he lost his property, and ironically it went back to his brothers.

up. In addition to the chiasm with the secondary judges and the Jephthah story being the focal point, the narrator also included two stories of children. The Gideon story describes what happened to sons as a result of fathers not living out their faith and not passing it on. The Jephthah story tells what happened to daughters when fathers were concerned for themselves rather than preparing a godly heritage. When the men failed, God raised up women to take over their responsibilities (e.g., Deborah, Jael, and the unnamed woman in chapter 9). But if the women are removed from the picture, as Jephthah’s daughter was, the very existence of the nation was at stake.51 This fact is seen in the account of Jephthah’s battle with Ephraim. Following the decimation of his own house Jephthah killed forty-two thousand of the house of Ephraim as well.52 What happened in his own family in the episode with his daughter reflects what happened in the larger family of the nation at the end of the story. As with Gideon, so with Jephthah: while not purposefully passing on the faith by planning for a godly heritage, they were destroying not only their own families but Israel as well. Problems in the home ultimately impacted the nation.

51 Perhaps this is why Jephthah’s daughter is not referred to by name. Without a name she represents more than just herself, which fits the narrator’s comment that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah (11:40). This may also apply to the other unnamed women in the book—the one who killed Abimelech, and Manoah’s wife. They all represent a larger group of women in Israel who were in the same position. For other ideas on the nameless daughter see Exum, “On Judges 11,” 139; and Kramer, “Jephthah’s Daughter,” 88–89.

52 “The Ephraimites threaten to destroy Jephthah’s house, and though they are referring to his dwelling place, the double-edged word ‘house’ carries with it a certain irony. Jephthah has, through his vow, already destroyed his house” (Gunn and Fewell, Narrative in the Hebrew Bible, 117).