The Power That Cannot Be Named: Jephthah’s Daughter as a Vehicle of Story

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Abstract
There is a great deal of writing on whether Jephthah actually killed his daughter in Judges 11, with some feminist scholars insisting the unnamed daughter is one more sign of the low value Biblical storytellers placed upon women. However, a literary approach, which also compares the honour the unnamed daughter accrues with the consistently honourable way the God of Israel behaves, especially in light of the dishonourable behaviour of Jephthah and his brothers, reveals a more complex role for this unnamed woman than is usually allowed.

Introduction
For millennia, scholars have agonized over the fate of Jephthah’s daughter. Augustine, for example, wrote extensively of his difficulty accepting her sacrificial murder by her father.1 To this day, scholars are debating whether she actually died as reflected in this passage.2 Many scholars who claim she did not die focus upon Jephthah’s vow in Judg 11:30–31, insisting there are possible alternate readings of the language used (יהוה היה ליהוה).3 Some scholars then bring in the statement in 11:39 that she “had never known a man” (RSV) as support for their conclusion that she was not killed, but that perhaps she was consecrated to the Lord’s service in a state of perpetual virginity.4 One may wonder if personal difficulties accepting the

2 Pamela T. Reis, Reading the Lines: A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002)
3 David Marcus, Jephthah and His Vow (Lubbock, Tex.: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 27.
4 Robinson, “Jephthah and His Daughter,” 335.
violence visited upon the daughter’s unnamed body lead to complex and sometimes highly-strained arguments to negate that violence. Furthermore, these arguments only “rescue” the intended victim by focusing not upon the woman herself but, instead, by focusing on Jephthah and on his intentions, on technicalities of his vow, or on language used by the writer/redactor. In a bit of ironic tension, arguments that seek to rescue this Unnamed Daughter from a terrible death require her own actions and her character be forgotten, further depleting her as a person.

Other scholars find in Jephthah’s daughter visible evidence of the power of patriarchy. In their readings, assuming the daughter did nothing deserving death under Torah, she is depicted as a mere trope that stands in contrast to Abraham’s son, Isaac (Gen 22). Phyllis Trible, in her seminal book *Texts of Terror*, sees the murder of Jephthah’s daughter as consistent with the devaluation of women in an androcentric culture, contrasted against male characters who, though less compelling, are nonetheless too valuable to die. In her book, Trible places this tale within a larger context of violence against women found throughout the Hebrew Bible. Thus she and some other scholars eschew the minute examination of Jephthah and of his vows, and they force us to look upon the fruits of violence and of patriarchy. Trible implies that when Jephthah blames his daughter for causing him anguish over his vow, his daughter’s negligible status as a young woman is confirmed. She also briefly mentions how the daughter is deemed by her father to be an acceptable resting place for the mimetic violence that drives Judg 11—violence which did not begin with the Ammorites, but with the expulsion of Jephthah due to his unsanctioned birth.

I agree with Trible’s conclusion that this unnamed woman is murdered, but I also wish to expand the work of Trible and others, by focusing upon the Unnamed Daughter of Judg 11 from before her appearance to after she was killed. Like them, I hope to illuminate a reading that peels away millennia of patriarchal and sexist interpretations, but I also wish to complicate such readings, since I find that both

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7 Klein, *Deborah to Esther*, 101–102.
8 Though feminist scholarship has been explicating the exploitation of female bodies as final locations for physical expressions of violence, there is little development of this idea in the texts referenced above. Yet this is worth some consideration, since Israel’s apostasy resulted in God permitting the violation of borders by the Ammonites; Jephthah was expelled from his home because his stepbrothers cast his presence as an assault on their holiness; Jephthah ended up invading Ammonite territory and then returned to Mizpah to claim his ancestral/leadership property; and these are all possible parallels for violence that did not end until the Unnamed Daughter was violently slain. For an exploration of how bodies can be used as physical locations to express violence, see Susan R. Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (eds. Jaggar and Bordo; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 13–33.
patriarchal and past feminist readings may obscure the depth and the power of this unnamed character. By acknowledging the androcentric milieu that made female characters easy victims and by exploring the power these victims sometimes simultaneously held, I also attempt to explore the nature of Hebrew story: this woman is not necessarily either a righteous person who is consecrated to special purpose or the hapless victim of a bloody, dehumanizing society; she can contain elements of both.\(^9\) Furthermore, by containing both, she is able to express a message that is in some ways admirable; yet, in the end, it is a message that is also brutally and horrifically honest. Through the masterful presentation of a woman not important enough to have a name, the ancient Hebrew storyteller unmasks injustice and victimization, while simultaneously extolling and slaughtering the victim.

To be clear, Trible’s work was completed entirely within the frame of Second-Wave Feminism, which overwhelmingly cast women as “victims” overcome by the relentless power of sexism (or, in this case, androcentrism).\(^10\) It was only after well-known feminists were critiqued from within the movement that Third-Wave Feminism began to paint women as capable of being simultaneously powerful and socially disadvantaged.\(^11\) It is not that Trible did not explore the role of the Unnamed Daughter enough; in fact, she examines her role in minute detail. It is rather that feminist interpretation at the time focused broadly on the ways sexism victimized women, without considering how women, despite social obstacles, showed resilience, courage, and ingenuity. The reading I suggest attempts to do so, uncovering a more complete picture of this unnamed, briefly-sketched character and honouring the complexity of the entire story.

**Loyalty and Honour**

To understand all the forces at play, we must back up to Judg 10:6. Here we learn of the action that triggers the crisis that results in the daughter’s death: according to the narrator, the descendants of Israel forsook the Lord and worshiped other gods, so the Lord withheld protection. The Philistines and the Ammonites raided Israel, and the Ammonites attacked from several fronts, including Gilead. In 10:15-16, the people of Israel cry out to the Lord to “deliver us,” and God becomes “indignant over the misery of Israel.” In these passages it is shown that despite the repeated faithlessness of the descendants of Israel (even though the Lord required

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the people to forsake other gods), in the end, God honours the covenant. In terms of storyline, once we know God is “indignant over the misery of Israel,” we should know God is going to act. As readers of the story, our question now becomes: What is going to happen next? How will God act to change things?

At this point, the leaders of Gilead—who we will learn are stepbrothers to Jephthah—begin a private conversation among themselves, asking who will fight the Ammonites for them. The search for a courageous warrior takes us back to the story of Jephthah and his brothers. Though the text implies that Jephthah was the natural choice to lead the military—he was Gilead’s son and was a great warrior—his brothers threw him out of the house and denied him any share of inheritance due to a technicality: his mother was not married to their father (11:1–3).

The use of honour becomes complex here. “Honour” in ancient honour/shame societies has been defined by Hanson and Oakman as “the conjunction of one’s status claim . . . with one’s social group’s acknowledgement of that claim.” We may see tension arise as we assume Jephthah’s desire for honour—he may have been afforded a great title, the military leader of Gilead, equal in his own area of expertise to his brothers, who were the civil leaders. This might be Jephthah’s “status claim” for himself. Yet his stepbrothers did not acknowledge his claim; they cast him out of the household and gave him neither land nor status. The brothers argued that the circumstances of his birth were ignoble; therefore, his presence dishonoured their family, and they owed him nothing. As his male family members, and as the civil heads of Gilead after their father’s death, they are the most immediate and powerful “social group.” As such, their rejection of any personal status claim is a public act that, in essence, robs Jephthah of his “ascribed honour,” that might have been his due to the circumstances of his birth (i.e., the son of Gilead and a great warrior).

Of course, their actions increased their control of their father’s inheritance and bypassed any claims Jephthah had to leadership. It may be assumed this was against Gilead’s wishes, since the brothers waited until “they were grown” to act, thus changing the arrangements Gilead had already put in place. One might question the motives of Jephthah’s brothers on several grounds, but by creating an argument of honour that benefitted them at Jephthah’s expense, they succeeded in obtaining what they wanted. Since honour, like all valued commodities, is a form of zero-sum capital (that is, one person/group’s gain can only take place when another person/group loses, and the same quantity must be transferred), the stepy

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brothers have gained at Jephthah’s expense. The result of this social exchange is made clear by the social result: Jephthah has no title, no family (in a sense, no name), and no land, while his brothers’ shares of all these increase. This can be seen, then, as the use of a false, manipulative code of religious or “acquired honour.” Distinct from “ascribed honour,” “acquired honour” is based not on birth but on the regard of others due to the accomplishments of the person or of his social group. The stepbrothers argue that their half-brother is disgraced (shameful), using an argument against adultery, one that may even seem “righteous,” in a way. “False honour” has long been recognized as a tool used by some to manipulate matters for personal benefit; indeed, a common definition of “false honour” is an appeal to some form of honour that benefits the one making the appeal at the expense of others:

True honour is an attachment to honest and beneficent principles, and a good reputation; and prompts a man to do good to others, and indeed to all men, at his own cost, pains, or peril. False honour is a pretence to this character, but does things that destroy it: And the abuse of honour is called honour, by those who from that good word borrow credit to act basely, rashly, or foolishly.

Even more appropriately, we can turn to other Hebrew Bible passages: “A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get riches” (Prov 11:16). Since women did not easily “get” honour, this adage shows that graciousness (such as accepting a half-brother as a full member of the family) was sure to increase one’s “acquired honour”; this is contrasted against dishonourable behaviour, violence, which both decreases the amount of acquired honour and increases the amount of one’s possessions. We can see how clearly the elders of Gilead ignored graciousness and embraced wealth. It is likely the stepbrothers decreased their overall store of acquired honour with the people of Gilead, yet they apparently felt the financial benefits warranted the loss.

Thus a truly honourable course, it can easily be argued, would have been to welcome Jephthah into the family as an equal, which also seems to uphold Exod 22:22: “You must not exploit a husbandless or fatherless person” (RSV, with underlined words substituted as indicated by Oxford Companion to the Bible). So the

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15 Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 198.
attempt by Israel’s leaders in Judg 11 to manipulate forces in ways that benefit them, even at the expense of others, mirror the attempts to acquire abundance and security by worshipping several gods, not just the God of Israel, as depicted in the preceding verses closing out ch. 10. There is no loyalty to true honour or to God’s Law (in this case, two sources of the same thing), only to what seems the most beneficial to the leaders at the moment.

Therefore, the first three verses of ch. 11 are too important to skip. It is here we see parallels to the behaviour of the people of Israel in ch. 10. While the people—including the leaders—rejected the Lord and worshiped other gods, the leaders reject Jephthah (and simultaneously reject God’s Law) because their father was unfaithful to their mother and slept with another woman. As they rejected the Lord, so do they reject the one who is a “mighty warrior,” a leader whom God may have provided.\(^1\) Though Jephthah’s brothers are unfaithful to God, during a time of trouble, they cry out for God to save them, asking to be forgiven for their inconstancy. At the same time, they reject even their half-brother, merely because he is the son of their inconstant father! God is held up as showing consistent honour—forgiving the once apostate people of Gilead despite their faithlessness. The elders, likewise, should have followed God’s example and should have remained true to their blood relationship with Jephthah. Instead, they will have it both ways: to be excused for their inconstancy, but to punish even the child of their father’s inconstancy.

However, once they find themselves invaded by the Ammonites, the brothers, who are now the leaders of Gilead, approach Jephthah again. Jephthah has little ascribed honour since he is not recognized as having any by birth. He might have acquired honour on his own, by using his skills to defend his home city, thus rising above the behaviour of his brothers; instead, he chose to become a bandit, so he has little honour of any kind. However, his brothers prevail upon him to rescue Gilead by offering to make him commander, then agreeing to his demand to be reinstated as a recognized child of Gilead and to be made the regional Head. This dialogue between Jephthah and his brothers is followed by his vow to the Lord to head up the people. Honour is still in short supply on earth; the brothers try to bestow the smallest title possible upon Jephthah (which would have enabled them to still deny his rights to property, to name, and to homestead), yet he negotiates a better position while his home city is under attack.\(^2\)

Jephthah then enters into dialogue with the king of Ammon, rejecting any

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\(^2\) Marcus argues (I find) quite convincingly the importance of being reinstated as a rightful heir of Gilead, a prerequisite to being made Head of Gilead: David Marcus, “The Bargaining between Jephthah and the Elders (Judges 11:4-11),” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989), 95–100. Between the two articles referenced here, Marcus provides detailed and revealing analyses of speech in Judg 11.
negotiation in a manner consistent with the bartering he conducted with his brothers. This dialogue is another low point, in which Jephthah quickly appeals to the God of Israel as judge, thus ending further negotiations. This may be another commentary upon false forms of honour, since each ruler is concerned primarily about land and about saving face. In honour/shame negotiations, one must be able to save face without allowing it to become the principal concern; otherwise what is socially considered honourable becomes dishonourable. The skillful negotiator will be able to maintain face, appease challengers, and benefit his/her people. Jephthah fails at all of these during his negotiations, mainly by appealing to Adonai as judge, indicating his unwillingness to consider Ammonite claims and paving the way for military action, a common method gods used to adjudicate disputes.  

As is depicted in 11:29, God intervenes in a clear way by endowing Jephthah with the Spirit of the Lord, which enables him to defeat the Ammonites who had invaded and to approach Ammon for a counter-attack. At this point, the warrior enters a monologue in which the fateful vow is made, and he states that “(what/) whoever” comes from the doors of his house to greet him will be given as a burnt offering, or holocaust—the exact same word used in 2 Kgs 3:27, where Mesha offers up his son in order to defeat the Israelites in battle (צולה). Trible sees this not as an oath of dedication, but one of distrust. God has already sent a warrior spirit upon him, and Mesha has already defeated all the Ammonites he has come across, but Trible claims he simply does not trust the Lord. God does not enter the conversation, having already provided assurance through the spirit of battle. 

I suggest this vow may actually be another example of false honour. Jephthah, realizing military success was within his grasp, stopped before the final attack to make a public oath (if it were not public, there would be no need to act upon it). The central problem of theories that state Jephthah never meant to kill anyone is they impose an intent upon him when he clearly did not expect his daughter to be the first to leave his house. Who, then, might he have expected to meet him upon his return? One scholar points out that the leaders of Gilead would have been expected to come out to meet him;  

they should have remained on the front line, at Mizpah on the border between Gilead and Ammon, to greet the commander upon his return. The pronoun Jephthah used in his vow, asher, allows for not only one person, but for a group of people, to be referenced. Furthermore, the biblical author makes clear that Jephthah did not return to his house at Tob. Instead, Jephthah returns to “his home in Mizpah,” the capital city, where his brothers live.

References:
20 Willis, “The Nature of Jephthah’s Authority,” 33–44.
21 Trible, Texts of Terror, 96.
When we realize he called upon the Lord to sanctify his brothers’ promise to make him ruler and to judge between him and the king of Ammon, we might wonder if Jephthah’s vows are merely attempts to manipulate spiritual forces or even just public opinion. If so, we know Jephthah also uses honour falsely, attempting to justify the murder of his brothers through a public vow to God. It not only avenge his past mistreatment, but it also serves his future interests in that it eliminates any rivals to the headship of Gilead—in present day, or in future generations.

Jephthah then completely routs the Ammonites, and so he returns to claim his new title. The honour God continues to show is revealed in divine steadfastness to the covenant promise (“I shall be your God, and you shall be my people”; Lev 25:12), despite the prior faithlessness of the people and the sordid politicking of the Gilead sons. When the conquering hero returns, the narrative tension is at a peak—will Jephthah prevail, avenge himself on his brothers, and establish a dynastic succession?

No! We meet his daughter, not important enough to name, because she is in one sense merely a vehicle for the storyteller, a hinge upon which the story turns. Since God remains faithful in the face of the peoples’ rejection, pride, and ruthlessness, there would be no moral thrust to this tale at all—leaders could behave however they wished since God will always protect the nation—unless tragedy strikes. Thus, Jephthah’s daughter becomes the means by which the moral example is made. When Jephthah schemed against his hated brothers, he planned to kill members of his own family—the siblings whose offspring may have usurped his children’s position! It is a member of his family who greets him, but it is his only child, a daughter he values enough to rend his clothes (11:34–35). So the writer makes this clear: failure to trust in the Lord will bring misery.

We may be affected by the elders’ absence when Jephthah returns from battle; we might even be indignant. If unaware of Jephthah’s vow, the elders’ absence shows that they are not truly committed to their promise to follow him as the new leader of Gilead. On the other hand, their absence may have been a result of the public vow Jephthah made; even so, it is still cowardly. The honourable course would have been to greet him appropriately and to offer some other form of compensation so that he would feel appeased (thereby losing some of their ascribed honour, but acquiring honour from the people for their bravery). If they were aware of Jephthah’s vow, it would seem even worse that they allowed his young daughter to go forth when they themselves were unwilling.

There is a point at which this tale touches upon the Hebrew notion of righteousness (צדקָה), which is steeped in the idea of right relation with God. Disrupting the community and disrupting relations with God are often intertwined, and, in this case, the true disruption began in 10:6 when the people of Israel rejected their Lord and worshiped foreign gods. So it is not surprising that the
leading household ejected a warrior (Jephthah) who might have held a title, based
upon a pretense of ignoble birth, since the righteousness that accompanies right
relationship with God was not present. The story of Jephthah’s daughter is, also, a
cautions moral lesson, revealing truths about honour, righteousness, and cova-

tant to a nation that needs to learn and to remember. At the same time, the story-
teller unmasks the dangers of disingenuously pious leadership, whether false piety
applied to adultery (as with Jephthah’s brothers) or to vengeance (as with Jeph-
thah himself). Finally, the story reveals that when dishonest and violent leaders
rule, righteous and powerless (hence, nameless) people then suffer.

The Centrality of Jephthah’s Daughter

I assert that the Unnamed Daughter is at once the least and the most central of
characters for several reasons. As we have seen, she is the point upon which the
story turns—though God rescues Israel from the Ammonites, we know there
will be tragedy, for the behaviour of all the leaders has been both inconstant and
dishonourable throughout. The calamity that is sure to follow disruption of right
relations is realized when she, as an innocent, instead of the cowardly brothers,
becomes the sacrificial victim. At this point, the daughter is simultaneously the
central person in the story and an objectified, mortal example of honour and sac-
rifice. I recognize this is highly problematic—we should always critique assertions
that powerless women may obtain admiration through suffering. To state this is
the narrator’s intent does not mean we must agree with that intention.

However, this recognition is critical to the power that the Unnamed Daughter
does show. This woman is the only mortal who behaves with great honour—even
though it is usually the role of men to accrue honour. In this sense, she actually
surpassed the bounds usually placed upon women, and she did so while observing
social strictures set for women, which is an astoundingly difficult feat. Though
the elders of Gilead behaved shamefully, she decided to bring honour to her father
through the song and dance performed when he returned victorious from battle (1
Sam 18:6–7). Jephthah did not expect this, perhaps since his daughter was young
(shown by her unmarried state) and he was new to his leadership position. More-
over, although the elders showed their lack of support for Jephthah’s leadership by
their absence—despite the public ceremony at Mizpah—the daughter showed her
determination to support her father in his promised role, tying her fate to his. If
the people eventually rejected Jephthah, they rejected also the daughter who hon-

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23 Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 26. As a general rule, men acquired honour,
whereas women could only preserve group honour, by not acquiring shame.

24 See, for example, Judg 3–4, where Deborah accrues honour, but steps outside the roles typically
imposed upon women.
oured him as their ruler. She behaved with the type of steadfast loyalty that we see only in God’s adherence to the covenant.

Furthermore, when Jephthah greets his daughter, he does not even try to negate his vow with the Lord, which, according to Jewish commentators, he should have done.\textsuperscript{25} Again, we see a dialogue in which he shows a false sense of honour. Because he made a public vow, he is in a position to lose face, especially since he is at that moment stepping into the role of civil head; this potential loss is compounded by the absence of the elders. The daughter understands this, and she tells him to sacrifice her, as he has promised. She maintains her commitment to her father’s leadership, even as he shows he is unwilling to take leadership responsibilities, such as changing the vow and dealing with the consequential loss of face. The story is very much one of unilateral adherence to true honour, by the Lord in heaven and by the Unnamed Daughter on earth.

As Trible points out, this is the anti-Isaac story told against Gen 22, but we can build even further upon her comparison.\textsuperscript{26} Although in Genesis God asked the father to sacrifice an innocent son but then provided a substitute, here the father asks to sacrifice his “guilty” brothers and instead slaughters his innocent daughter. God’s promise to Abraham of many descendants was fulfilled through the descendants of Isaac; the hope that future children may succeed Jephthah in leadership ends with the killing of his only child and, as such, his entire bloodline.

The Complexity of the Daughter

At this point, the daughter has clearly taken over the narrative. Although she had no part in the vow her father made, or in the dealings he had with the elders, she put her own interests last in order to maintain the stability of her family and of her community. She is the only selfless mortal example in the story, though the androcentrism of the culture is shown in that her sacrifice requires her death, and, despite her pivotal role, she is not even afforded a name. In one sense, she is merely a tool for the punishment (loss of bloodline) for Jephthah. Yet the female character who shows up the male characters is a significant surprise for a highly androcentric culture; this character can stand on her own, without any concerns for Jephthah. Even more surprising, all the male leaders around her can only use false, shallow considerations of honour to compete for leadership, whereas she accrues real honour.

\textsuperscript{25} Abraham Cohen and A. J. Rosenberg, \textit{Joshua, Judges: Hebrew Text & English Translation with Introductions & Commentary} (2nd ed., rev.; Soncino Books of the Bible; New York: Soncino, 1982), 258. According to some midrashim, Jephthah should have negated the vow since it contradicted Torah; also, the Priest should have told Jephthah to negate it.

\textsuperscript{26} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 98
Thus, her gender is part of the sudden reversal of the story: after hearing again and again how self-aggrandizing, violent, and dishonourable the male leaders can be, a young woman upstages them all, first with her dance, then with her sacrifice, and then with her mourning period in the mountains. For a woman of that time and place, one’s social status and contribution to the community were viewed largely through the children born and raised for the advancement of her people. By mourning the loss of opportunity to bear children, she is showing that she takes such communal responsibility seriously. This helps account for the repetition in v. 39 of her virgin status; the repetition also underscores how undeserving she was of her fate. According to Lev 21:9, a priest’s daughter should be burnt with fire if she practices fornication; why not, also, the daughter of a judge? The repetition drives home the point that there was no justifiable reason whatsoever for this horrific sacrifice.

It is hard for people of our day to comprehend the level of grandeur to which the Unnamed Daughter ascends. Moreover, it is stunning to consider the complexity of a person who reaches this height through her death and yet, due to her gender, is still deemed unimportant enough to be named. She is simultaneously the least-valued and the most central character, the contrast against which all others are to be judged.

The meaning of her story’s closing passage is also multivalent. We learn the Unnamed Daughter is honoured by the women of Israel for four days each year, unlike Jephthah or the elders of Gilead. We never hear of the brothers again, and Jephthah judges for six violent years; despite his scheming, he ends up more a military chief than a civil head (12:1–7). Yet the entire cycle begins with victimization due to devaluation of a woman—Jephthah’s exile, excused because his mother was “a harlot”—and ends with the victimization of a devalued woman, the ritual sacrifice of the daughter. In one sense, the cycle is complete; the rejection of God that initiated the disorder of Gilead was resolved when the elders of Gilead reluctantly anoint Jephthah their head, and Jephthah’s selfish ways result in the end of his lineage. Still, the larger cycle—one that holds up false ideas of honour in order to privilege some over others—is reinscribed. There is no justice for women deemed harlots or for female youth determined to live honourably among shameful leaders. The tale seems at once a savage commentary upon the bitter fruits of poor leadership and an acceptance of it.

Lessons from the Daughter

After our reading, we are left with several questions, one of which is: What is a hero to the ancients? As in Plutarch’s Lives of Illustrious Men, there seems to be a formal, public acknowledgement that whoever rises to a certain level is, by
definition, a hero (e.g., Jephthah). Yet unlike Greek and Roman histories, there is a thrill in an intentional unsettling of these public definitions—hero, judge, honour—that opens up disruptive possibilities. I suggest this helps us understand some of the ways in which the ancients related to God.

If we agree with Brueggemann that “the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text,” then we must take seriously not only the horror of the violent injustice visited upon the daughter, but also the high place she occupies. It may be difficult to reconcile, in our own minds, a story that ironically reveals the destructiveness of the judges, insinuates the murderous androcentrism of the culture, and subtly draws out the parallels between the behaviour of the Lord and the behaviour of the daughter. There is something challenging and unsatisfactory about the ending, a tension that is left unresolved. Read one way, the unsettling conclusion is that the only person whose behaviour mirrors that of the Lord cannot survive the betrayals of the leaders of Gilead.

Let me suggest another, more sublime conclusion. The one who fashioned the history of Jephthah may have purposely, though ever-so-quietly, highlighted the parallel between the God of Israel and the Unnamed Daughter—two beings whose names were unspoken—in order to impart a crucial message to the people of Israel. It could be that the storyteller who gave shape to Judg 10 and 11 sees all around a world in which violent, virulent, so-called “heroes” are accepted and lauded by the general population, despite their destructive behaviours, including manipulating public religious sentiment for personal gain. An insightful narrator may then recognize that the problems of Israel stem from the inability of the people of Israel to “read” true spiritual devotion, which results in honourable actions, in public figures.

In order to drive this point home, historical texts might serve to unsettle readers in nuanced ways, much like the Ming Period Chinese novel, The Scholars, by Ching-tzu Wu. On the surface, Judg 10 and 11 merely recount the events that mark a leader’s ascent and rule. On this level, a typical hero—Jephthah—drives back and defeats an invading enemy. Yet, on the level the storyteller eventually

29 Jingzi Wu, *The Scholars* (trans. Gladys Yang; New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). This classic of 14th Century Chinese literature contains vignette after vignette in which humble, wise young persons are given positions of great authority by important leaders—only to transform into arrogant fools as they assume their responsibilities. Wu never comments upon the state of affairs, simply telling story after story as if he were relating an objective history; the reader must, over time, recognize the pattern and decode the author’s critique of the way favoritism at the highest levels is destroying his nation.
wishes us to read, Jephthah—and his brothers—are not heroes, but rather, they are emblematic of the real reason Israel is under constant attack: everyone seeks his own advantage, rather than seeking right relationship with God.

If so, then the tragedy of the Unnamed Daughter’s murder expands in scope, pulling not just her, or even just her family, into the black hole of mimetic violence. All of Israel, and even those of us who read this story today, are affected by the horror of her violent death. For if the Unnamed Daughter is truly the one person in this narrative whose behaviour mirrors the behaviour of the Lord, then she is not simply a means by which the reader learns the errors of Jephthah’s ways; additionally, she is not simply the one who achieves great status through the voluntary acceptance of her father’s unrighteousness. She is, in the grand scheme of the narrative, the answer to the cry of the people of Israel in Judg 10:15: “deliver us, we pray thee, this day.” The narrator is saying, then, that the salvation of Israel does not lie with the military exploits of violent chieftains or with the sly manipulations of scheming rulers; instead, it lies with those who follow God’s example and who wholly understand God’s repeated command: “be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44; 20:26). Yet the people of that time, eyes fixed rigidly upon Jephthah, failed to see where God’s deliverance truly lay—burning on an altar. It seems too that as scholars who debate whether the Unnamed Daughter did or did not die, we still often fail to see this deliverance today.