

Reading the nameless Professor Judith Lieu

Reading One : Judges 11:1, 29-40 and the Letter to the Hebrews 11:32-34, 39 – 12:1

Now Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, was a mighty warrior. ²⁹ Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt-offering.' ³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. ³³ He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighbourhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So, the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.' ³⁶ She said to him, 'My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites.' ³⁷ And she said to her father, 'Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander[Ⓜ] on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I.' ³⁸ 'Go,' he said and sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that ⁴⁰ for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

And from the Letter to the Hebrews 11

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

Reading Two

From 'Jephthah's Daughter: A Lament' by Alicia Ostriker

Maimonides said:

'Of our own accord, with our intelligence
and understanding, we can distinguish
between good and evil, doing as we choose.
Nothing holds us back from making this choice'.

So then there was a moment in time

the knife might fall

or it might

not fall

So then there is a moment

in time

the knife may fall

or it may not fall

there is a moment in time.

(A. Ostriker, 'Performing Jephthah's Daughter', Bridges 8 (2000) 25-370)

TALK

The Letter to the Hebrews asks: 'what more should I say – about Jephthah'?

This talk is part of a series on 'How to read books – how are we to read this book, this story.

One answer would be, 'Don't'. But for the last 2 thousand years from Hebrews which 'cancels' her to a contemporary Jewish poet writing a lament to be performed by the daughters of Israel, we can trace readers of this story who have expressed, retold their reading in prose, commentary, poetry, music, art.

We should start by asking, What sort of book or story is it? As Jewish Scripture, TANAK, it is part of 'the prophets', in the Christian Old Testament it is treated as 'history', but not history as we understand: no sources, analysis, authentication in a largely pre-literate and pre-textual age. Perhaps saga or legend; I would prefer a site of memory; a tale told by a community of its past, a tale that shapes the community.

Older interpreters would look behind the story for its significance – perhaps as a brief episode in the chaotic and uncentralised period of settlement and conquest; perhaps a sign of the decline of rule and authority before the monarchy. If scholars paused to reflect on this episode – they would present Jephthah as foolish, not choosing the words of his vow carefully enough, but not cruel.

Others would see it as a stage in the distancing from human sacrifice that was part of ancient religious ritual. It highlights the problematic nature of the term 'sacrifice'. Who makes it?

Some folk-lorists present it as a narrativising of young women's transition from their father's household to that of their husbands; the loss of virginity; reflecting a rite of passage. Sex and death/ death and sex. Interpreted as sacrifice but in a patriarchal society, but there we are. It may offer a glimpse into women's religious lives otherwise hidden in/ by official narrative.

But these are not reading the story in its own right, for its own sake. If time we could explore the careful artistry but also shocking brevity with which it is told; what it says and what it does not describe – where is her mother; where are the neighbours who might protest? Why is the final act not described? How do we deal with the emotional austerity of a horrific story?. As one scholar has described it, one of several 'Texts of Terror' in Scripture.

I searched a couple of Christian online sites: For one this is a story of a foolish father and ignorant servant who did not understand what God was or what God desired. For another it conveys a warning that being possessed of the spirit is no guarantee of understanding the will and nature of the spirit. That article ended with a brief and oblique expectation that Jephthah's daughter might be better off, when she will be resurrected by God.

The story is resolutely about Jephthah – which is why it does not portray his sacrificing of her. He is the real victim – he not only has an only child who is female, but even loses her: he will have no line, no posterity: – 'Alas my daughter, you have brought me very low'. But her story is there, it asks to be told.

Hers is not the only story of a sacrificed daughter: when Agamemnon prepares to lead the Greek forces against Troy they are prevented by a storm stirred up by the goddess who has been affronted by one of his soldiers. Agamemnon learns the goddess can only be placated by

the sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. Her story was immortalised by the Greek dramatist, Euripides (Iphigenia in Aulis). In one version at the last moment Iphigenia is replaced by a deer.

Then there is Isaac: Abraham is told by God to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, although again at the last moment a ram appears to be offered in his place (Genesis 22). Like Isaac she is an only child. But for her there is no deer, no ram – although some have suggested that perhaps Jephthah sent her off to the ancient equivalent of a convent.

Like Isaac she became in early Christian interpretation a prefiguration of Jesus, the only son of the father. Unlike Isaac she fits that role because implication is that she is a voluntary sacrifice; Does that help? Does that help make sense of her; does it help think about death of Jesus?

Unlike Isaac she has no name. Her only identity is as the daughter of Jephthah (even in v. 40). As so often with women in Biblical tradition (and not just Biblical tradition) her only identity is in terms of her dominant male.

However, Isaac does not die because as the only heir he was not expendable; Jephthah cannot take her place because as the man of war who defends Israel he is not expendable. She is a woman, an unmarried girl; she is expendable. In terms that over last 60 years since Viet Nam have become a common place in the theory of war, she is 'collateral damage' - it is usually the women, children, marginalised, nameless who are collateral damage.

But, rather than leave her as the victim not just of her father's vow but of the author/ text, can we read, bringing her to the centre of the stage; not as an episode in exploits of Jephthah, not absorbed into the something better of which Hebrews speaks, but to read, to hear her story.

Can we treat her as a person and not just as a character who exists only in the terms and words of the story. This is the perennial question about fiction, if this is a form of fiction. Can we give her a name, give her agency.

The text does give her a voice: in v. 35 'My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites.'

Do we hear here her proper filial submission, accepting her role; accepting patriarchy and its costs. Or is this to deny that in such circumstances women can still discover their own agency. Is she exercising agency just as did Iphigenia who celebrated her part in her father's enterprise: claiming a role in her father's military victory and the furtherance of God's purposes. Is she seizing the right to play her part in this outpouring of violence.

This seems to be the voice that Byron gives her in his poem, 'The daughter of Jephtha':

Though the virgins of Salem lament,
Be the judge and the hero unbent!
I have won the great battle for thee,
And my Father and Country are free!

When this blood of thy giving hath gush'd,
When the voice that thou lovest is hush'd,
Let my memory still be thy pride,
And forget not I smiled as I died!

Or should we hear her response as an act of subversion: she maintains her virginity in defiance of the woman's destiny of subordination. She uses her powerlessness to expose the corruption of power and violence. The repeated 'you' of v. 35 exposes the father's complicity in the structures of power and violence he represents. He cannot hide behind a blustering, 'I had no choice', 'I made a vow', 'I only followed orders'.

But we should not ignore the silent participants in this drama. The Ammonites, traditional inhabitants of parts of land before the coming of the Hebrews, the people of Israel. They are dispossessed as a result of Jephtha's vow and of her anticipated sacrifice. How do we read that in a post-colonial age? How do we read in the light of appeals to these traditions in recent weeks.

And what about God? Jephthah makes his vow to God but does God need it? Does God approve it? In v. 29 the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah – is all that happens under the influence of the spirit of God – the driving force in the accounts of the past in the book of Judges. Could God have intervened; should God have intervened? The earliest Jewish, rabbinic retellings of the story seek to absolve God of responsibility; but in so doing they expose the yawning silence in the text.

How are we to read this story? How am I to read it from where I stand, as a person of faith, as a woman, as a woman with a daughter? How are we to read it as we participate in a requiem mass first performed on all soul's day in 1947, in the aftermath of World War II, and which perhaps Duruflé had already conceived during the war in Occupied, Vichy, France. How are we to read in the midst of the images that fill our TV screens this week?

After 3000 years the story still resonates. If I read it, it is not to be told the answers, but to hear more clearly the questions that have to be asked.