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## **Son of a Prostitute and Daughter of a Warrior: What Do You Think the Story in Judges 11 Means?**

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In welchem Maß erreicht die feministisch-theologische Arbeit auch gewöhnliche Bibelleserinnen und Bibelleser, über Fachzeitschriften, Tagungen und Hörsäle hinaus? Der Beitrag untersucht diese Frage anhand einer qualitativen Studie, welche die Geschichte von Jiftach und seiner Tochter in Richter 11 von Laien lesen und interpretieren lässt. Die Geschichte des Vaters, der seine namenlose Tochter wegen eines religiösen Schwurs opfert, war oft Gegenstand feministischer Kritik. Die Veröffentlichungen feministischer Analysen von Richter 11 sind zahlreich. Kommt die feministische Arbeit zu Richter 11 im Speziellen und zur Bibel als Ganzer in der breiten Öffentlichkeit an und beeinflusst sie die Art und Weise, wie gewöhnliche Bibelleserinnen und Bibelleser biblische Texte verstehen, die Gewalt an Frauen aufweisen? Beeinflusst die feministische Kritik an Patriarchat und herrschenden Geschlechterideologien moderne Leserinnen und Leser, wenn sie mit einer solchen Geschichte direkt konfrontiert sind?

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### **1. Introduction: the motivation and the issue**

How do ordinary readers (i.e., non-biblical scholars) construct meaning when they read the bible? For many Christians or Jews who attend religious services or activities, meanings may be supplied to them by a religious leader trained in a particular tradition with one or more approaches to interpretation. But what happens when readers have to rely on their own interpretive abilities? How do they make sense of a text that is far removed from them in time, space and culture?

This is a question that might more typically fall within the interests of psychologists or sociologists but not of biblical scholars. Biblical scholars have focused on constructing their own meanings in an effort to explore literary, historical and other dimensions of biblical texts. But is the work of academic biblical scholars, and particularly feminist biblical scholars, reaching and influencing non-specialist, ordinary readers of the bible?

This question has taken on considerable interest for me since my feminist biblical courses were relocated from a religious studies department to a women's studies program in 1996. I have been struck by the lack of knowledge, indeed, even the lack of awareness, of the work of feminist biblical scholars on the part of the feminist women's studies students in my courses. If feminist students in a university context had not encountered feminist interpretations of the bible, then what is the likelihood that our work has been reaching a wider general audience? If feminist analysis of the bible is not reaching beyond the walls of the academy and changing the way ordinary readers read and relate to the biblical text, how can it be relevant?

In my view, the feminist movement is about making the world a better place for women. Feminist biblical criticism is part of that insofar as it challenges traditional interpretations and uses of the bible that have harmed or impeded women and insofar as it exposes and critiques the patriarchal gender ideologies embedded in the biblical texts. "To be truly academic, and worthy of its place in the Academy," David Clines claimed, "biblical studies has to be truly critical ... critical about the Bible's contents, its theology, its ideology."<sup>1</sup> Esther Fuchs has made a similar point with respect to feminist biblical criticism. It should, Fuchs argues, "open up a radical interrogation of biblical theology, biblical literary criticism, biblical religion and biblical historical criticism" and be "transformational" rather than "inclusional."<sup>2</sup> I agree wholeheartedly with Fuchs but I also think that to be transformational our work must reach beyond the small community of feminist biblical scholars. It must inform the way ordinary readers interpret and relate to biblical texts.

## **2. Focusing on the Reader**

The focus on the reader is something that has become central in academic biblical scholarship. Since the 1980s, reader-response criticism and audience criticism are terms used for the wide range of theories and critical practices examining the reader, the reading process and the response to reading.<sup>3</sup> Within biblical studies, however, the reader or audience investigated has been the implied original reader (male) or the expert reader/analyst (white, male and North American) and has generally not acknowledged the ideologies of those readers.<sup>4</sup>

David Clines sees this shift to the reader and the reading process as necessary if “we are going to take the presence of the bible in the modern world seriously....”<sup>5</sup> Meaning does not reside exclusively in the text but is the product of a reader reading a text. But Clines also understands that who is reading the bible will have an impact on what meaning is derived from it. The social location and values of the readers play a role in how they read a text. Such an approach is predicated on one of the key claims of feminist analysis, namely, that bias-free, neutral or “objective”<sup>6</sup> interpretation does not exist. Moreover, “readers” must not be restricted to imagined ones. As Clines has argued, “we have to concentrate on what people are making of the Bible, what reception it is receiving, how it is being understood, what it is capable of meaning to real live people....” But, he conceded, in the academy, “very few people in our field seem to be interested in what is the case....”<sup>7</sup>

In order to find out what people are “making of the Bible,” Clines incorporated several social scientific methods in his course on the “Bible and the Modern World.” Some of his students conducted street surveys about the bible that were quantitative in nature in Sheffield, England.<sup>8</sup> Others engaged in what might be identified as a combination of participant observer and qualitative studies.<sup>9</sup> Clines, himself, conducted a content analysis of uses of the bible in the press.<sup>10</sup> Social scientific studies such as these, carried out with non-scholarly readers or participants, are definitely the exception rather than the rule within the discipline of biblical studies.

### **3. The Research Project**

The project I undertook was like those of Clines and his students insofar as it examined how ordinary contemporary readers, not biblical scholars, understand the bible. But it also had the more specific interest of seeing whether or not, and to what extent, feminist scholarship, biblical and other, is reaching beyond the academic feminist community, beyond the academic community of biblical scholars to the general public. It sought to explore the extent to which feminist biblical criticism is having a transformational effect on the way ordinary readers read the bible.

I asked a small group of readers to read and interpret a narrative from the Hebrew bible that had been deemed by Phyllis Trible a “text of terror” because a female character is subject to serious physical violence.<sup>11</sup> I chose the story of Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 11

because this is a text that few of the students who took my course on women and the bible had been familiar with prior to the course. Even students with strong affiliations to Christianity or Judaism rarely recognized this text as being part of the Hebrew bible. This fact made it a useful text for my study because, unlike Genesis 2-3 (Adam and Eve) or Genesis 19 (Lot, his wife and daughters and the destruction of Sodom), stories generally known to many people not only by being read or heard in religious contexts but also through other cultural uses of the stories, the story in Judges 11 is not a cultural icon. This made it unlikely that my subjects would have been influenced by cultural interpretations. Nor were they likely to have been influenced by mainstream theological interpretations since it seems this text is rarely used as the basis for sermons or as part of religious liturgies. Judges 11 offered the possibility of presenting my reader subjects with the challenge of depending on their own interpretive strategies rather than drawing upon what others had told them about the story.

The research project was a feminist qualitative study of how ordinary readers construct meaning when they read the story in Judges 11. Its particular focus was on how such readers understand and assess the fate of the daughter who is sacrificed by her father, Jephthah, to fulfill his religious vow. To what extent do ordinary readers relate the fate of the daughter to the issue of male violence toward women? To what extent do they notice the daughter's lack of a name and lack of independence? To what extent do they see the daughter as a literary construct that is made to espouse the values of patriarchy by the author/narrator? To what extent do they see her death as the consequence of male power and ego? In other words, do ordinary readers read a story like this with a feminist lens? Do they resist its patriarchal assumptions or do they give any other evidence of having been influenced by feminist critical approaches to the bible?

#### **4. The Project Model**

The feminist model for my project was Stuart Charmé's study of children's gendered responses to the story of Adam and Eve.<sup>12</sup> Charmé was interested in examining how girls and boys "without any significant hermeneutic or theological background make sense of this story."<sup>13</sup> Because he was dealing with a story that may well have more theological baggage than any other in the bible, Charmé sought to minimize the impact of that baggage by choosing research subjects between the ages of 4 and 11 to see "what children's pre-

existing ideas about gender are and how those ideas may influence children's understanding of a well-know biblical story”<sup>14</sup> without complicated theological overlays. Charmé found a strong hermeneutic consistency between the interpretations given by the boys in his study and the traditional interpretations of it through centuries of Western theology.<sup>15</sup> One of the conclusions from his study is that stories like the Adam and Eve story are likely to elicit and reinforce in many children notions of gender roles and gender identity that presuppose the inferiority and subordination of women.<sup>16</sup> He is not at all optimistic that feminist hermeneutic efforts to rehabilitate the story can be successful.

Although my interest was not in children's gender identity, Charmé's study was useful to me in several ways. First, it gave me the model of research on human subjects. Rather than speculating about what a text means to people, we can actually ask them directly. Secondly, it suggested to me the need to find a way to minimize the impact of traditional interpretations on the interpretations made by the research subjects. Charmé did this by choosing children as subjects. I did this by choosing a relatively obscure text. Thirdly, Charmé's study provided me with a framework that included asking my subjects to explain the story in their own words, to identify with characters and to offer their ideas about what changes they might make in the text if changes were possible.

## **5. Method and Methodology**

In all of my work, I make a distinction between the terms “method” and “methodology” using the distinction made by Sandra Harding, a feminist philosopher of science. Harding defines “method” as “a technique for gathering evidence” of which there are just three basic categories: listening, observing, and examining historical traces and records.<sup>17</sup> Such techniques are not feminist. They are merely tools that can be used by feminists and non-feminists alike to gather data in the research process.

What determines whether research is, or is not, feminist is the way in which the evidence-gathering tools are used. This is methodology. Harding sees methodology as a theory and analysis of how research should proceed.<sup>18</sup> This is where feminist research distinguishes itself from non-feminist research. Feminist methodologies begin with women's lived experiences, gather data needed and wanted by women to answer questions of importance to women.<sup>19</sup> They have social change as their overt goal. Feminist research fundamentally

challenges and rejects the notion of scientific objectivity. The point of feminist research is to make life better for women and other marginalized groups.

In terms of my study, the method, or research tool, is one of listening to informants. It is a qualitative method insofar as it seeks an in-depth understanding of how individuals or groups understand the world around them and construct meaning from their experiences. Qualitative research concerns itself with the quality of data rather than the quantity. Whereas quantitative research provides large amounts of data from which generalizations may be made, the results of qualitative research cannot be generalized. Rather, qualitative research allows rich descriptions to be extracted and/or hypotheses to be developed. So the data gathered by listening to my subjects interpret the story in Judges 11 are not generalizable but they do give me insight into how this small group of readers goes about interpreting an ancient text from the bible in the context of their contemporary situations. They also allow me to see if any patterns can be discerned in the responses received that might allow me to construct hypotheses to be tested in future studies.

What makes my study feminist is clearly not the fact that I interviewed subjects in a qualitative study, though qualitative research has been a favoured method of feminist researchers. My study is feminist because the motivation for it began in the lived experiences of some women, the experiences of subordination in male-dominated cultures and the experiences of male violence toward women. It starts from the historical evidence that the bible has played a major role in fostering and sustaining patriarchal attitudes and practices that have had negative consequences in the lives of women in Western cultures over the centuries. Feminist scholarship has identified and challenged problematic patriarchal content in the bible and offered strategies for minimizing its damaging impact on women today. The purpose of my qualitative study is to explore whether or not the interpretations given by a group of ordinary readers of a biblical text containing violence toward a female character show any evidence of having been influenced by the work of feminist biblical scholars or even feminism in general.

Do such readers read *with* the gender ideology of the text or do they *resist* it? Do male and female readers interpret the actions of Jephthah and the fate of his daughter in similar or different ways?

## 6. The Project Design

The project consisted of interviewing twelve subjects, three women and three men with a strong religious background and three women and three men with little or no religious background.<sup>20</sup> Recruitment was done on the campus of my university so all volunteers were either currently enrolled in a university undergraduate or graduate programme or had recently graduated.<sup>21</sup> They ranged in age from 19 to 36.<sup>22</sup>

When volunteers arrived for the scheduled interview, they were given a description of the research project that told them the purpose of the study was to investigate how modern readers make sense of an ancient text such as the bible. They were told that there were no correct and incorrect interpretations and that over the centuries readers had given many different interpretations of every biblical text. I emphasized that I would not be assessing whether their interpretations were right or wrong. Rather, I was interested to hear from them what they thought the text meant and what factors led them to their interpretation. Subjects were not deceived about the purpose of the study but they were not specifically told that I was particularly interested in how readers interpreted the part of the story about the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter.

Next, subjects were given information about what they would be asked to do, namely, to read the story in Judges 11 and then to answer a set of questions about the story. They were reassured that they did not have to recall the story from memory but could consult the text as much or as little as they deemed necessary in answering the questions.

All of the interviews began with a set of six demographic questions that asked the age, sex, educational background and religious affiliation of the subject and then asked whether or not the subject had ever read the bible. Finally, the subject was asked to indicate her or his level of familiarity with the bible's content: very familiar, somewhat familiar, somewhat unfamiliar or very unfamiliar.

Subjects were then asked to read Judges 11. They were provided with a copy of the NRSV translation from which all textual and other notes had been removed. They were given as much time as they wanted to read the text one or more times. Once they indicated they had finished reading, they were asked a set of twelve questions covering the content and

message of the story, characters in the story, their feelings about the story and changes they would make in the story if they could.<sup>23</sup> Subjects were free to consult the text as much as they needed to answer any of the questions.

The hypothesis for the study was that work of feminist biblical scholars is not making its way into the mainstream and will not have had an impact on the way in which the subjects in this study interpret the text of Judges 11.<sup>24</sup> This hypothesis is based on the lack of knowledge about feminist biblical criticism among the women's studies students I have taught over the last decade.

## **7. Some Results<sup>25</sup>**

### *7.1 Knowledge of the story:*

Of those who identified themselves in the demographic survey as having a strong religious affiliation and participation in a church, five rated their familiarity with the bible as somewhat familiar and only one claimed to be very familiar. Of those who identified themselves as not having a strong religious background, two said they were somewhat unfamiliar with the bible and the remaining subjects said they were not very familiar with it or had not read it at all. There was, therefore, a clear difference between the two groups with respect to their perceptions of familiarity with the contents of the bible. This difference did not carry over to a prior knowledge of the Judges 11 text (Q. 1/1a). Of those with a religious background only one, a male who identified his religious affiliation as Seventh Day Adventist, said he had read and heard the text many times. He said he had heard it in church and in Sabbath school and had read it when he began reading the bible for himself at age 7. One of the female subjects, also a Seventh Day Adventist, said she had "probably" read it because she had attended a Roman Catholic school where the book of Judges had been studied, so she felt she had to have read it but she could not recall this specific text. All other subjects, with or without a religious background or familiarity with the content of the bible, said they had neither heard nor read this story before. This was particularly useful information for me because I had wanted to choose a text that was largely unfamiliar to readers so that their interpretations would not merely be restatements of what they had been told by religious leaders or had learned from some other source. Their responses indicated that whatever meanings they drew from the text would likely be of their own construction. The fact that even the majority of those who believed they were

familiar or somewhat familiar with the content of the bible had never heard or read this text underscores the notion of canon-within-the canon. The story of Jephthah and his daughter does not seem to be among the texts that frequently serve as the basis for sermons.

### *7.2 The message of the story:*

There appeared to be a distinct difference between readers with a religious background and those without with respect to the central or main message the story had for them (Q. 3). All but one of the religious readers mentioned god as part of the central message. They included such ideas as “god will do as he says,” “if you stay faithful, the lord will conquer your enemies,” and “god protects his people.” One F/R said the central message was that you should be “true to your intentions.” One M/R found three central messages, one having to do with the outcast who comes back as head, another that humbleness brings the spirit of the lord and the third that when pride replaces humbleness it leads to the loss of what means most.

The non-religious readers did not see the deity as so centrally connected to the message. Just one M/NR said the central message was that “the will of god cannot be questioned.” Despite difficulties, Jephthah’s faith in god was “so strong that even when it comes down to sacrificing his own daughter, he does it – he has difficulty doing it but he does it.” Other non-religious readers found messages such as “peace is a better proposition than getting into fights,” “conflict of man ... if you have more than one person you have conflict ... it was not a good situation – he lost his daughter and a whole bunch of people died most likely,” “be careful what promises you make and be careful what you wish for,” “betrayal,” and “there are always consequences for actions.” The non-religious readers generally focused much more on the human actions and responsibilities.

The answers provided by the subjects to the general questions about the content of the story had some noteworthy features. When asked to tell me in their own words what the story was about, readers offered a wide range of summaries. Some attempted to account for several parts of the text while others boiled it down to one or two main concepts. In general, the overall grasp of the story did not seem to be strong. Many readers indicated that they found the story confusing, particularly the part about the war.

Of those who retold the story in terms of a major concept, one F/R said it was a story about “a vow to the Lord that had to be kept” while a second said that the basic theme of the story was that of “connections or relations with your family and loyalty”. One F/NR said the story “revolved around a man called Jephthah as a person,” while a second F/NR said it was essentially a story about conflict, of “our god versus your god.” One M/NR saw it as a story of vengeance where Jephthah, betrayed by his family, turned against them to conquer Israel. The remaining subjects attempted to summarize more details of the story such as the war with the Ammonites, the vow made by Jephthah and the interaction between Jephthah and his daughter. Only half of the readers (two F/R, two M/R, one F/NR and one M/NR) made any mention of Jephthah’s daughter in their summary of the story. This may underscore the contention of many feminist analysts that the narrator has been relatively successful in focusing reader attention on Jephthah and not on the daughter.<sup>26</sup>

### 7.3 *Who is Jephthah, what does he do and why does he do it?*

Only two readers specifically identified Jephthah as the son of a prostitute (one F/R and one M/NR) and one other (M/R) identified him as an illegitimate child in their retelling of the story. In the follow-up question that asked why Jephthah had fled his home to live in the land of Tob (Q. 2a), six (one F/R, one M/R, one F/NR and three M/NR) said it was because his mother was a prostitute. Two, one F/R and one M/R, did not use the term “prostitute” but said that Jephthah was the “son of another woman.” One F/NR said he was “kicked out because of his brothers’ moral problem with his mother not being morally correct.” The remaining F/NR said that Jephthah left because he was “not accepted by his own family.” Four readers, one F/R and three M/R, linked Jephthah’s departure to the issue of inheritance. When asked why the elders of Gilead invited Jephthah back (Q. 2b), eight explained this by reference to Jephthah being a good warrior or an experienced fighter. Of these, one M/NR also interpreted this rationale as “opportunistic” while one F/NR said it was “selfish and self-centred” on the part of the elders. Two, one M/R and one M/NR did not specifically identify Jephthah as a good warrior but said he was invited back because the Ammonites were making war against Israel and the elders “needed” him to command their army. One M/R said he came back as part of an agreement to fight a war.

In contrast, one F/R made no mention of Jephthah’s fighting ability *per se*. Rather, she said that the elders “knew they were in trouble when the war started” and had invited him back because they “knew Jephthah was a man of god, a great man ... from a great household.”

All of the subjects indicated that, in making a bargain with the elders (Q. 2c), Jephthah wanted to become leader or head if he was victorious. Some also saw this as a way for Jephthah to get justice or what was rightfully his. There was a strong consensus among the subjects in their answer to this question.

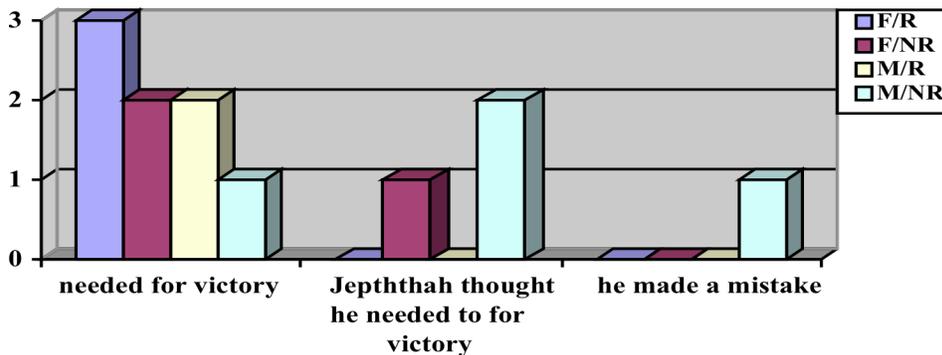
The question of why Jephthah made a vow to the lord (Q. 2g) received several responses connecting the vow in a causal way to victory. All of the F/R readers made this link. One said that Jephthah “makes the vow so he can win against the Ammonites.” A second said “he wanted to win and he knew the only way to win was through the lord.” The third said that it was “important for him to defeat the Ammonites because they were taking away something from his own people” and he was “protecting his own people.” Of the M/R subjects, one said he made the vow because he “needed god on his side.” A second linked the vow to the spirit coming upon Jephthah. He said that “if the spirit hadn’t come, he wouldn’t have made any sort of vow” and that the vow was that he would offer whoever came out of his house as a burnt offering if god brought “the Ammonites into his hand.” The response of the third M/R, the Seventh Day Adventist, was the most interesting. He was the only respondent who saw the vow as a “mistake.” He said that Jephthah “wasn’t supposed to make vows” because he “didn’t have to, because the spirit of the lord already came onto him” which was “proof he was chosen of god” and that “he was going to be successful.” This reader saw the vow as a huge mistake that resulted from Jephthah “talking too much” and from “his pride” that led him to ask that the Ammonites be delivered into his hands when he should have asked that they be “delivered to the lord’s hands” because it “wasn’t [Jephthah’s] battle in the first place.”

In answer to another question, this reader went back to the notion of the vow as a mistake. He said that he had been reading this story for years. As a child, he thought Jephthah should keep his vow, although the vow troubled him. Now, however, he said he has realized that when you make a mistake, “you should go back on it.” This was as close as any of the subjects came to feminist readings that see the vow as superfluous in light of the reception of the spirit of the lord<sup>27</sup> or that see “useless and destructive words”<sup>28</sup> as problematic.

One F/NR and one M/NR also connected the vow to victory. The F/NR explicitly linked winning the war to Jephthah’s desire to become head or leader of the Gileadites. The M/NR saw the making of the vow as a way to “secure victory for his people” but the burnt

offering itself he saw as a way to “give thanks for the victory.” Another F/NR thought there was a causal effect between the vow and what he wanted. She used her own life as a student to illustrate her point. If she wanted an education, she had to work to pay for it. Similarly, if Jephthah wanted victory, he had to offer something he would “miss terribly.” Two other M/NR readers were less direct in their linking the vow to victory. One said he was “not sure” why Jephthah made the vow but said that Jephthah *thought* a burnt offering was the “right thing to do,” if the lord gave the Ammonites into his hand. The other saw the vow as a way to “stop the war” by which he meant “giving the Ammonites into [Jephthah’s] hands.” The third F/NR said it was “because of his faith” that Jephthah made the vow. She said Jephthah “believed the lord was a fair judge.”

#### Q 2.g. Why did Jephthah make a vow?



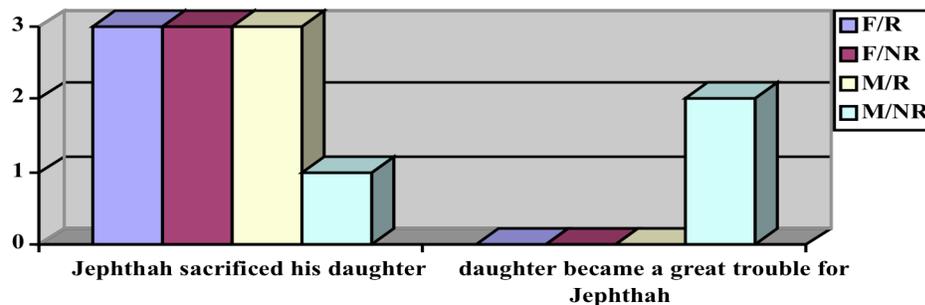
#### 7.4 The fate of Jephthah’s daughter:

When asked what happened when Jephthah went home (Q. 2.i) and what happened to his daughter (Q. 2j), all respondents said that it was his daughter who came out of his house to meet him. All F/R readers indicated that it was then a necessity for Jephthah to kill his daughter. One said “he must kill his daughter because of his deal with god.” A second said “she had to be sacrificed and in the end she was sacrificed.” The third agreed that she had to be sacrificed, but said this was “not a good thing.” She said that Jephthah was “upset” because his daughter had caused him “great trouble” and put him in a “predicament” because he could not take the vow back. All three M/R readers also indicated the daughter was sacrificed. One nuanced the reason somewhat by saying that Jephthah *said* he could not take the vow back” and by indicating that the daughter *agreed* that he could not take the vow back. A second made no comment about the role of the vow, but said the daughter

made a “covenant with Jephthah” in which he granted her “two months to wander in the mountains to lose her virginity” and “find a husband” before returning to be made a “burnt offering.” The third, the Seventh Day Adventist, interpreted Jephthah’s tearing of his clothing as a response of mourning because she was his “only daughter and his pride and joy.” He thought Jephthah was upset because “he had finally got her the respect that she needed, that the family needed, and now he had to go kill her – what does he have to live for?” This reader knew of interpretations that suggested Jephthah did not kill his daughter but he rejected them.<sup>29</sup> He said “I don’t care what everyone else says that she was just a virgin the rest of her life! It said ‘burnt offering, burnt offering’ – he killed her.”

Of the F/NR readers, all agreed that the daughter *had to be sacrificed* because of the vow and *was sacrificed*. Two of the three M/NR readers said the daughter had “become a great trouble” for Jephthah. Neither explicitly said she was sacrificed. One only mentioned her bewailing her virginity while the other said he was “not sure” Jephthah “would have killed her.” The third M/NR said Jephthah was upset because he had to sacrifice her because of the vow.

#### Q. 2j. What happened to Jephthah’s daughter?



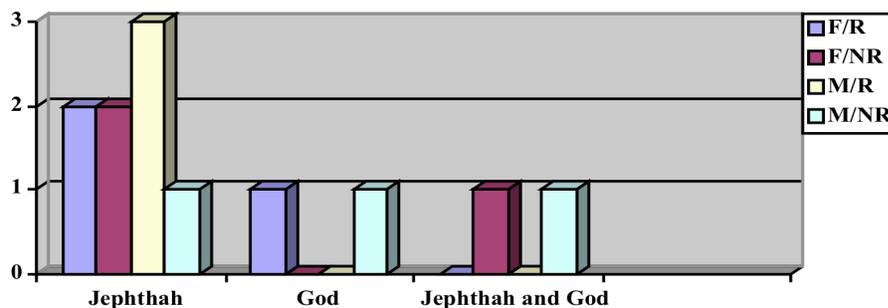
There was a strong consensus, therefore, that the vow *necessitated* Jephthah killing his daughter and, except for the one M/R who identified the vow as a “mistake,” there was no negative assessment of Jephthah for having made the vow or for having fulfilled it. Most interpreted Jephthah’s action in fulfilling his vow, even though it meant killing his only daughter, as an act of faithfulness, not an act of unfaithfulness as Tribble has argued.<sup>30</sup> This consensus lends support to the claim by scholars like Esther Fuchs that “the father’s responsibility for his daughter’s demise is obscured” by the patriarchal narrative that denies

the daughter a name and “creates empathy and admiration for the central male character, God or Yhwh.”<sup>31</sup>

#### 7.5 Central characters in the story:

The responses of the subjects to the questions about characters in the story reinforce this assessment by Fuchs. Eight readers identified Jephthah as the central character (Q. 4). Two identified Jephthah and the deity as the central characters and two (one F/R and one M/NR) identified the deity alone as the central character. Of those who identified the deity as the central character, both said Jephthah was the second most important character. Of those who said Jephthah was the central character, one said the “lord” was the second most important. The inclusion of the deity as a character is interesting because god is not an active character in the story but is only referenced by some of the characters.<sup>32</sup>

#### Q 4. Who is the most important or central character in the story?



The inclusion of the deity became more apparent when readers were asked which character they would be, if they could be any of the characters in the story. Four readers, two M/R, one F/NR and one M/NR chose to be god. Three chose to be Jephthah, one F/R, one F/NR and one M/MR. Only two respondents, one F/R and one F/NR chose to be the daughter.

This response was quite different from Charmé’s where over 80% of boys identified with Adam, the male character, and less than 10% identified with god while over 60% of girls chose to be the female character, Eve, and almost 20% chose to be god. In my study, half of the male readers identified with the deity while only one of six identified with Jephthah, even though five of six saw Jephthah as the central character in the story. None of the male readers chose to be the daughter. Of the remaining two male readers, one chose to be one of

Jephthah's men so he could get the "spoils" of the war while the other chose to identify with none of the characters because he regarded them all as tragic. On the other hand, the female readers were more evenly distributed. Two chose the male character, Jephthah, and two chose the female character, the daughter. One chose another male character, a brother of Jephthah, and the remaining one chose the deity. The F/R reader who chose to be a brother of Jephthah said she did not want to be Jephthah "because he had to kill his daughter." Interestingly, one F/NR reader who chose to be Jephthah said she made this choice because as Jephthah "I wouldn't kill my daughter at the end" but would "deal with any punishment the lord gave out but I don't think it is right to kill anyone even if you said you would." This explanation was very similar to that of the only male reader, also an NR, who chose Jephthah. He said he saw the story as a "lesson learned" and that, as Jephthah, he would "want to try to do things differently.... I would not have acted in the same way in that kind of situation – I would have made a better situation." In contrast, the F/R who chose to be Jephthah did so because "he keeps his vow even though it is hard to do so. It shows his strength and his strong belief in the lord."

These explanations perhaps hint at differences in ethical priorities between readers with and without religious backgrounds in this study. For the religious readers, fidelity to the deity or to a promise made to a deity is paramount while for non-religious readers, human life stands above a promise to a deity.

Four readers, one from each group, identified Jephthah as the character they would least like to be. Two said they chose Jephthah because he "had to kill his daughter," one said it was because he lost everything, including his daughter, and the fourth spoke of tough decisions Jephthah had to make. All four had also identified Jephthah as the central character. So, these readers distinguished between a character being central to the plot and being desirable.

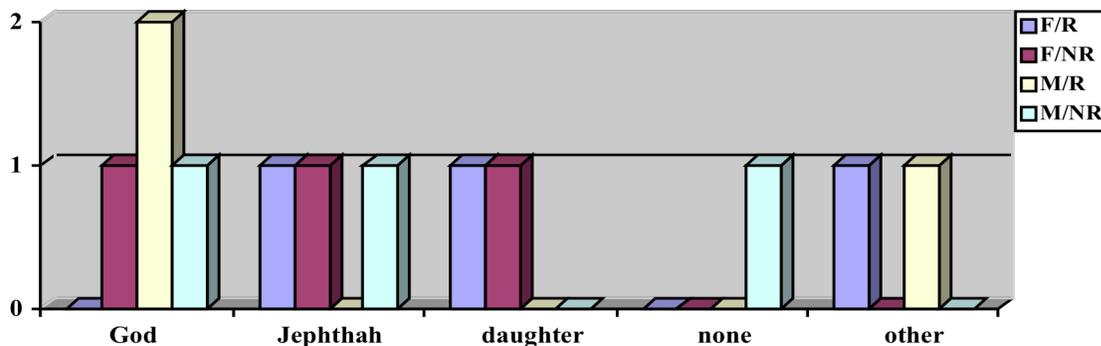
Of the two female readers who chose the daughter as the character they would most like to be, the F/R, a Muslim, who had placed the daughter as the second most important character in the story after Jephthah, identified with the daughter because she saw her essentially as a martyr. The daughter, she said, was "dedicated to her father's righteousness" so she "doesn't want him to go back on his word to the lord." For this reader, "death is nothing" and anything is "doable when it is for the lord." In her view, the daughter was "at a higher

level of thinking,” so much so that the situation gave the daughter “an opportunity to show her true character.” This reader thought the daughter was “doing something good” that would give her “an opportunity to go to heaven.”

The other reader, an F/NR, who chose to be Jephthah’s daughter, did so for quite different reasons. She did see the daughter as “courageous” because when she happily dances out to greet her father upon his return from battle, he tells her “you got to die” and “she says OK just give me two months of some fun.” The reader thought the daughter wanted to “go and have sex cause she hasn’t had sex” but “then she doesn’t even do it. She just goes away, has some fun with her friends and then comes back when she’s supposed to.” Ultimately, however, this reader identified with the daughter because she was the “character I relate to the most as a female.” This was the only reader for whom gender identity seemed to be an issue. She saw no other female characters with whom she could identify in this story so, although the fate of the daughter was troubling to her, the gender of the character was the overriding factor in her identification.

Perhaps even more interesting was the fact that only one reader, the M/NR who resisted being any of the characters because he saw them all as experiencing tragedy, chose the daughter as the character he would least like to be. His reason was precise and concise: he would not want to be the daughter because “she loses her life in a pointless sacrifice.” His answer, like that of the readers who chose to be Jephthah in order to change the fate of the daughter, seems to place a high value on the life of the daughter, a value that was of a higher priority than that of keeping a religious vow.

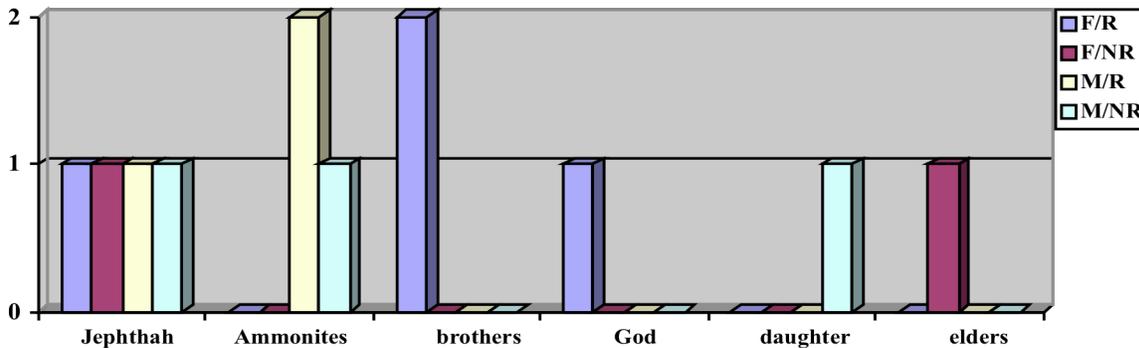
**Q. 6 If you could be any of the characters in the story, which would it be?**



The other choices for the character a reader would least like to be included three for the Ammonites or the king of the Ammonites. All were male readers. Two M/Rs made this choice because “god is not on their side,” “they are not the chosen people” and “they had their land taken away.”

Two F/R readers chose the brothers of Jephthah as the character they would least like to be. Their reasons includes that the brothers were “hypocrites” and “unjust” and that “they ended up below [Jephthah] and humiliated, when they had to beg him to come back.” One F/NR reader chose the elders of Gilead because “I would not be so self-centred.” Another F/NR chose the lord as the character she would least like to be because she felt it would be very “difficult and stressful” “having such a dominance over the lives of people and their happiness.”

**Q. 7 Which character would you least like to be?**

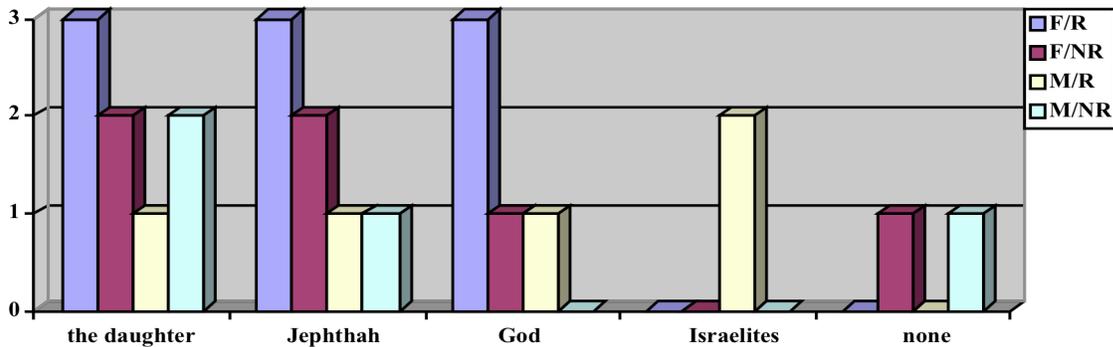


All but one reader, an F/NR, saw the deity as the most powerful character in the story (Q. 8). The one exception identified Jephthah as most powerful. The question about the weakest character (Q. 9) drew a range of responses but only one, an M/R, identified the daughter as the weakest. His reason was that the daughter had no choice but could only ask permission to go to the mountains for two months.

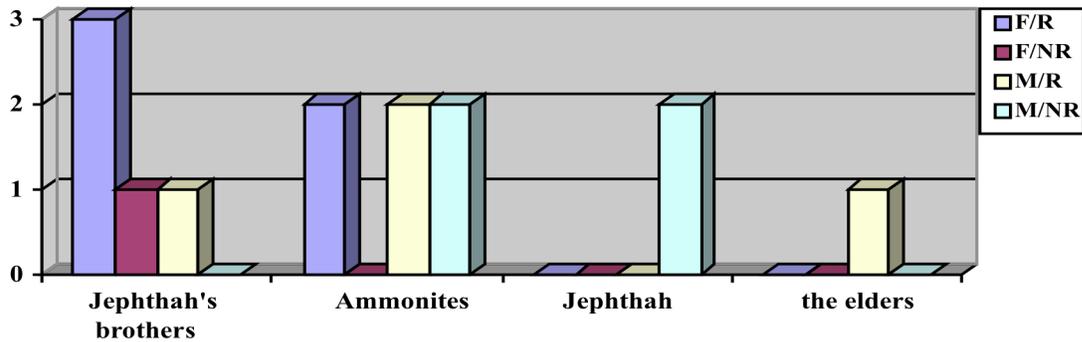
The assessment of characters as good or bad (Q. 10) produced a range of responses. Readers could identify as many characters as they wished in either category. One F/NR and one M/NR did not think any of the characters could be classified as good or bad. Of the other responses, the most popular choice for a good character was the daughter with eight, followed by Jephthah, chosen by seven, and god, chosen by five. In terms of bad characters,

there was less agreement. The Ammonites were seen as bad by six, the half-brothers of Jephthah by five readers. Two M/NR readers classified Jephthah as bad while one M/R said the elders were bad.

**Q. 10 Which characters would you identify as good?**



**Q. 10 Which characters would you identify as bad?**



The most interesting feature of the responses to this question was the ambiguity that was apparent with respect to Jephthah as a character. Of the seven who classified him as a good character, two, one F/R and one M/NR, made a distinction between how Jephthah was presented in the story and how they evaluated his character. The F/R said that “in the story, Jephthah is made out to be a good character but I’m not convinced he necessarily is.” She saw his loyalty to god as good but the fact that he went to war as bad. The M/NR also began his response by saying “in the context of the story Jephthah is good and the Ammonites are bad.” He went on to say, however, that he was not swayed by Jephthah’s argument that the lands were given him by god. Rather, he thought Jephthah used god as a “rationale” for conquering land. He regarded this as a negative factor. This reader was also

somewhat sceptical about classifying the daughter as good. Because her trust in her father was so great she was willing to sacrifice her life unquestioningly, this reader said “she is a virtuous character, I suppose.” These readers might be said to be resisting readers, insofar as they were intuitively aware of a narrative point of view but were in disagreement with it. Two other readers, both M/NR, saw Jephthah as bad. One classified him this way because “he probably slept with his daughter.” The other reader simply identified Jephthah as bad without offering any explanation.

Interestingly, all of the M/NR readers negatively evaluated Jephthah. Among the M/R readers only one classified Jephthah as good. The other two did not classify him at all. They chose to mention only other characters. The M readers, therefore, exhibited a strong tendency to see Jephthah negatively or to ignore him. On the other hand, four of six female readers, two R and two NR, classified Jephthah as a good character. The female readers were less inclined to be critical of Jephthah. Their responses to this question reinforced the results from the identity question. More female readers than male chose to be Jephthah and that seems to have been because more female readers saw Jephthah as a good character.

The last question in the interview asked readers what they would change in the story if they could change any part (Q12). The answers to this question revealed a clear difference between R and NR readers. Three R readers, two female and one male, said they would change the part about the sacrifice of the daughter. The first F/R reader said that “instead of making a deal with god that he would sacrifice who he first saw” she would have Jephthah “promise to praise god for the victory.” For her, the deal was “pointless” because she could not see how it “glorified god.” The second F/R said she would change the story so the daughter “didn’t have to die.” She said she would make it like the story of Abraham who “didn’t have to sacrifice his son” so she would have Jephthah sacrifice something else instead. This reader would retain the element of sacrifice but would change the outcome for the daughter because the daughter “is an innocent person who dies” and who “doesn’t live to her full potential.” One M/R, the Seventh Day Adventist who had described Jephthah’s vow as a mistake, also said he would “change the part about the sacrifice.” He provided the most extensive discussion of this question. He, too, would have Jephthah “sacrifice something else other than his daughter – a goat or something.” He also referenced the Abraham/Isaac story. Moreover, he would have Jephthah say he was sorry he had made the vow in the first place because:

... you weren't supposed to offer your children as burnt offerings – it specifically said in the law, 'do not burn up your children.' So offering a daughter as a sacrifice is *definitely* not going to make god happy because it is against his law. You got this conflict that I made vow but it's against god's law – well, god's law gotta supersede over your silly vow. I've heard people say he was expecting a dog or something to come out to greet him but you weren't supposed to offer unclean animals for sacrifice ... god doesn't want unclean animals so, he shouldn't have done it.... [Jephthah] really did a disservice against god because he put this image in people's mind that if you want something you gotta promise something. That's not why [god] does things ... Bad precedent, bad, bad.

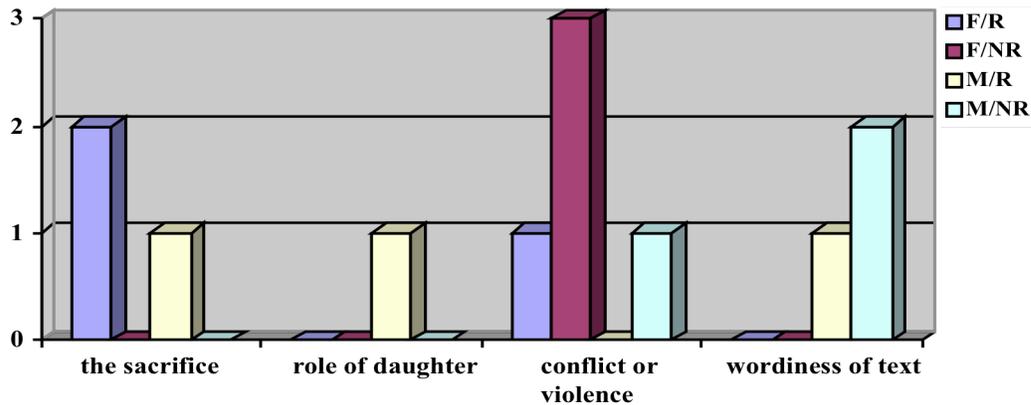
One other M/R reader mentioned changing the section involving the daughter. He did not specifically mention changing the sacrifice but rather said that he would give the daughter more of a role and more choice as a female. Implicitly, he might have meant that she would have more of a say about what happened to her but he did not go into detail. By raising the issue of the femaleness of the character, he did indicate, however, an awareness that connected her lack of choice to her sex in the context of this story.

Four of the NR readers chose a different area of the story to introduce change. Three F and one M readers would make changes earlier in the story so that the consequences later in the story would be different. All of these NR readers focused on avoiding violence in some way. Three would change the interaction between Jephthah and the Ammonites so that a peaceful resolution to the conflict could occur and bloodshed could be avoided. One F/NR said, "I would make it so that they could talk about [their difference] and not fight – such a female response." The M/NR who had earlier said that he would chose to be Jephthah so that he could do things differently, said that he would change the story so that there was a "reasoned conclusion to the conflict and not a slaughter." When asked why he would make this change, he said, "maybe it's the optimist in me...it doesn't have to resort back to 'I'm going to take this with force' or 'I'm going to slaughter and kill to get what I want.'"

One F/NR chose to make a change right at the beginning of the story. She would not have Jephthah kicked out of his family by the wife's sons. If the whole story started out in a different way, then perhaps "the war wouldn't have happened and there would have been less death and destruction, less unhappiness and suffering overall."

All of these NR change strategies, while not specifically mentioning the vow and subsequent sacrifice of the daughter, presumably were intended to change the whole course of the story, including the fate of the daughter. Whereas the R readers were generally comfortable with the idea of the Israelites fighting the Ammonites in the context of what was given them by their god, the NR readers were less inclined to accept the validity of the claim that the Israelites had any right to the land on this basis. One F/NR said that the two sides were fighting over the land because “they *think* their gods want it.” This view echoed that of the M/NR who resisted classifying Jephthah as good because he regarded the appeal to divine approval for the war as merely a “rationale.”

#### Q. 12 What part of the story would you change?



### 8. Some Concluding Thoughts

The results of this qualitative study were disappointing but not unexpected. There was no evidence of direct awareness of any feminist studies of this text in the responses of any of the readers. Nor was there any evidence to suggest a conscious application of a feminist critique of patriarchal social structures or gender ideology. None of the readers made gender a central category in their interpretation of the story.

Nevertheless, the results are interesting insofar as they show how ordinary readers deal with various aspects of the text. They did identify as problematic some of the very issues of concern to feminists, including the father’s vow and the resulting sacrifice of his daughter.

There was clearly a degree of resistance to the death of the daughter, though little analysis of the reasons leading to her sacrifice. The most extensive and critical perspective was supplied by the M/R Seventh Day Adventist who saw the vow as a mistake and the human sacrifice as wrong. In his analysis, the fault lay completely with Jephthah. It was the individual, not the patriarchal social system or religion that led to this outcome for the daughter.

Among NR readers, the resistance was focused more broadly on the climate of violence and its multiple manifestations in Jephthah's exclusion from the family, in the war over land claims, and in the sacrifice of the daughter. Although critical of the violence, none of these readers offered an explanation of underlying causes. NR readers were also less likely than R readers to accept the narrative perspective of the text, perhaps because the bible was not authoritative for them. None, however, made this explicit in their responses.

The resistance of readers, especially male readers, to the character of Jephthah was, for me, one of the most interesting results. While most readers saw his vow as necessary to secure his victory and many saw his fulfillment of the vow as necessary to his commitment, most did not choose Jephthah as the character they would like to be. Four of six M readers judged him to be a "bad" character. Four of six F readers, on the other hand, assessed him as a "good" character. The women readers seemed more accepting of Jephthah and his behaviour than the men.

While F readers were willing to identify with male characters, no M readers chose to be the daughter. One M reader saw the daughter as the weakest and one saw her as the character he would least like to be. Only three M readers mentioned her as a "good" character. In contrast, all of the F/R and 2 of the F/NR readers listed the daughter as a "good" character. Not only does this suggest that the daughter was more marginal to male readers, it raises the possibility that female readers are more willing to accept the powerlessness, complicity and submissiveness of the daughter as positive characteristics.

One final point that was shocking, given that the readers were all university educated, was that when asked what part of the story they would change, half of the M readers said they would shorten or simplify it because it was "too wordy" or the style "too difficult to read."

Perhaps the growing irrelevance of the bible is connected to its incomprehensibility to male readers!

Despite the fact that the results of this small study cannot be generalized, they do not give reason to think that the work of feminist biblical scholars is having much of a widespread impact on society. If our work is to have a transformational effect on the way the biblical tradition impacts the lives of women and if it is to play a role in building a truly equitable society, it appears we will have to work harder to take our research out of the academy and into the streets.

### **Appendix: Interview Questions**

#### *Instructions:*

Read the story contained in Judges 11, a passage from the Hebrew bible/Tanak/Old Testament. You can re-read any or all of the text at any time during this interview. This is not a test. There are no correct or incorrect answers to the questions below. What is important is what you think about the story and its meaning.

#### *Interview questions:*

1. Have you ever read or heard this story before?
  - a. If so, where and when?
  
2. Tell me in your own words what this story is about.
  - a. Why did Jephthah flee from his home to live in the land of Tob?
  - b. Why did the elders of Gilead invite Jephthah to come back?
  - c. What was the bargain Jephthah made with the elders of Gilead? What did he want?
  - d. Why were the Ammonites making war against Israel?
  - e. What was Jephthah's reply to the Ammonites?
  - f. How did the Ammonites reply to Jephthah?
  - g. Why did Jephthah make a vow to the Lord?
  - h. What happened to the Ammonites?
  - i. What happened to Jephthah when he went home?
  - j. What happened to Jephthah's daughter and why?

3. What is the central, or main, message of the story?
  - a. What led you to this conclusion about the meaning of the story?
  - b. What are the main factors or clues in the story that point to this meaning for you?
  
4. Who is the central or most important character in the story?
  - a. What makes this character central?
  
5. Who is the second most important character?
  - a. What makes this character second in importance?
  
6. If you could be any of the characters in the story, which one would it be?
  - a. What makes you choose this character?
  
7. Which character would you least like to be?
  - a. What makes you choose this character?
  
8. Who is the most powerful character in the story?
  - a. What makes this character seem powerful?
  
9. Who is the weakest character in the story?
  - a. What makes this character seem weak?
  
10. If you had to evaluate the characters in terms of good and bad which characters would you identify as good (if any) and which characters would you identify as bad (if any)?
  
11. What feelings do you have when you read this story?
  - a. What factors in the story make you feel this way?
  
12. If you could change any part of this story, which part would it be?
  - a. What change would you make?
  - b. Why would you make this change?

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- <sup>1</sup> David Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 25.
- <sup>2</sup> Esther Fuchs, “Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women: The Neo-Liberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008): 65.
- <sup>3</sup> A useful survey of reader-response criticism can be found in The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 20-69.
- <sup>4</sup> Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, 57, 67.
- <sup>5</sup> Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World*, 11.
- <sup>6</sup> I put the word in quotation marks because Sandra Harding makes a case for distinguishing between weak objectivity and strong objectivity. It is weak objectivity that is being denied here. “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity?’” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, (ed. Sandra Harding; New York: Routledge, 2004), 127-140.
- <sup>7</sup> Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World*, 17.
- <sup>8</sup> Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World*, 55-68.
- <sup>9</sup> Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World*, 80-87.
- <sup>10</sup> Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World*, 68-79.
- <sup>11</sup> Phyllis Trible, “The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice,” in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 93-116.
- <sup>12</sup> Stuart Charmé, “Children’s Gendered Responses to the Story of Adam and Eve,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 2 (1997): 27-44.
- <sup>13</sup> Charmé, “Children’s Gendered Responses,” 28.
- <sup>14</sup> Charmé, “Children’s Gendered Responses,” 29.
- <sup>15</sup> Charmé, “Children’s Gendered Responses,” 36-37.
- <sup>16</sup> Charmé, “Children’s Gendered Responses,” 40.
- <sup>17</sup> Sandra Harding, “Introduction,” in *Feminism and Methodology*, (ed. Sandra Harding; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Harding, “Introduction,” 2.
- <sup>19</sup> Harding, “Introduction,” 6-8.
- <sup>20</sup> In discussing the answers of individual subjects, the group into which they fall will be identified as F/R or M/R for female and male subjects from religious backgrounds and F/NR or M/NR for female and male subjects from non-religious backgrounds.
- <sup>21</sup> No one who had taken a course from me at any time was accepted as a volunteer subject.
- <sup>22</sup> All research on human subjects must be approved by the University’s Research Ethics Board. The ethical design of the project and the informed consent of all subjects are among the many aspects that are required.

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<sup>23</sup> The interview questions are listed in the appendix. A reference to the question numbers will be given in the text as the particular question results are discussed.

<sup>24</sup> For a summary of some of the major issues discussed by feminist biblical scholars see Barbara Miller, *Tell it on the Mountain: The Daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 77-93.

<sup>25</sup> A full presentation of the responses to all the questions in the interview is not possible here.

<sup>26</sup> See Esther Fuchs, “Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 116-130.

<sup>27</sup> Tribble, “The Daughter of Jephthah,” 96-98. Tribble sees this vow as an “act of unfaithfulness.”

<sup>28</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, “On Judges 11,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 133.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of such interpretations see, David Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 28-54.

<sup>30</sup> Tribble, “The Daughter of Jephthah,” 93-102.

<sup>31</sup> Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 14, 177.

<sup>32</sup> It would be interesting to determine if the tendency to read the deity into the story as a character comes about because all readers knew the text was from the Hebrew bible. A follow-up study could be done in which some readers are told it is a biblical story and others are told it is an ancient Near Eastern story.

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