

## Double Trouble: Counting the Cost of Jephthah

### I. 40 x 2

In a paper published in 1980, J. Alberto Soggin lamented: “Despite forty years of research by leading exegetes, the problem of what the minor judges represent remains unsolved.”<sup>1</sup> Today, nigh on forty years later, the reality is substantially the same. In those eight decades, consideration of the question has been shaped largely by the perspectives of Albrecht Alt and his student, Martin Noth. Alt found in the minor judges an authenticity of historical record which he considered to be lacking in the accounts of the major judges. The chief basis for his conclusion was that their respective periods of office are given not in rounded figures, as in the case of the major judges, but in numbers that possess a “completely unartificial appearance.”<sup>2</sup> Noth developed Alt’s arguments to claim that the key to understanding the role of the minor judges in Settlement-era Israel and their relationship with the major judges is furnished in the portrayal of Jephthah who combines features of both. Alone among the charismatic military leaders, he was also a minor judge.<sup>3</sup> Given the influence which Noth’s conclusions have exercised on successive generations of scholars,<sup>4</sup> it is worth quoting his supporting arguments:

<sup>1</sup> “Das Amt der ‘kleinen Richter’ in Israel,” *VT* 30 (1980): 245-8 (246).

<sup>2</sup> *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (trans. R.A. Wilson; Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 102.

<sup>3</sup> *The History of Israel* (2nd edn; London: SCM Press, 1960), 101-2.

<sup>4</sup> E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., “‘The ‘Minor Judges’: Some Literary and Historical Considerations,” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 185-201 (186).

It is very conspicuous that Dtr. finishes his account of Jephthah not as he usually does, by saying that there were forty years of “rest” after the victory of the hero concerned, but with details that follow the system used in the list of “(minor) judges”: a statement concerning his six-year period of office, then the report of his death and place of burial. To this Dtr. attaches statements about three other “judges” who succeeded one another and came immediately after Jephthah. Given Jephthah’s presence in both traditions, it is easy to account for the arrangement of material in Judges. The “minor judges” come immediately before and after the Jephthah story: Judg. 10-12 is obviously based on the stories of “minor judges” as Dtr. knew it.<sup>5</sup>

Noth states that the Jephthah narrative would resemble the descriptions of the minor judges more closely had it not been “excessively swelled” by the material dealing with his heroic feats or, as Hartmut Rösel puts it more graphically, if this material had not “ripped apart” the minor judge sequence.<sup>6</sup> Several commentators do not accept the sharp dichotomy that Noth perceived between the major and minor judges. Nevertheless, there has been broad support for his thesis that Jephthah provides the single common denominator between the heroic figures and the standardized list of individuals found in Judg 10:1-5; 12:8-15, and, therefore, uniquely elucidates the role of the judge, major and minor, in the book.<sup>7</sup> This assessment is over-optimistic, however, since despite the extensive

<sup>5</sup> *The Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup 15; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 43.

<sup>6</sup> “Jephtah und das Problem der Richter,” *Biblica* 61 (1980): 251-55 (251-2).

<sup>7</sup> For example: *Biblisch-historisches Handwörterbuch* 2 (ed. Bo Reicke and L. Rost; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 810; Wolfgang Richter, “Die Überlieferungen um Jephtah: Ri 10,17 – 12,6,” *Biblica* 47 (1966): 485-556 (555); Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth* (4th edn, ATD 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), 209, 218; Alan J. Hauser, “The ‘Minor Judges’: A Re-Evaluation,” *JBL* 94 (1975): 190-200 (190 n. 4, 193, 200); Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, 2 vols (London: Darton, Longman & Todd,

record of Jephthah's background, attitudes, and behaviour supplied in the composition, in reality, his story leaves us scarcely the wiser regarding the concrete role of "judge."

In summary, Noth's arguments for Jephthah's membership of the minor judge group are that the "forty years of rest" formula is absent, the period of his tenure as judge is stated, and his death and place of burial are recorded. All these points, however, apply also to Samson, Jephthah's successor as a judge-deliverer. Moreover, whereas, in contrast to the minor judges, Jephthah's place of burial is unspecified – "he was buried in the cities of Gilead" (12:7) – the writer makes a point of being precise in Samson's obituary: "they buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father; and he judged Israel for twenty years" (16:31). What distinguishes Samson from the minor judges using Noth's criteria is that the years during which he judged Israel appear rounded. *A priori* there is no reason why twenty should not express as precise a period as the twenty-three years of Tola or, for that matter, the six of Jephthah. But, even accepting that Samson's may be a rounded figure, a formidable difficulty besets the Alt-Noth view of the verisimilitudinous quality of

1978), 760-1; J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (2nd rev. edn, trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1980), 176; idem, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1981), 207, but note 196-8; idem, "Das Amt," 245; Mullen, "'Minor Judges,'" 199, 201; John Gray, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1986), 192-3; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSup 46; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 176; Timothy M. Willis, "The Nature of Jephthah's Authority," *CBQ* 59 (1997): 33-44 (33); Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: B&H, 1999), 338, 342; K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 43.

the five minor judges' year attributions, namely, that, taken as a group, they total seventy, one of the most symbolically loaded numerals in the Bible and hardly "unartificial."<sup>8</sup>

Jephthah's exclusion from the list of minor judges on the grounds that, as the writer has deliberately compiled a group to whom he assigns a combined period in "office" of seventy years, Jephthah cannot be a member of this group, any more than Samson is, plainly presents a challenge to the prevailing view.<sup>9</sup>

Noth's final argument for Jephthah as a minor judge is that his pericope is lodged within the sequence of minor judges. On this basis, a case can be made, as Lillian Klein proposes, for Samson's membership of the group since his story concludes the series.<sup>10</sup> Samson is not introduced, however, with the formula "and after X," which is a unifying trait of the five minor judges; but, then, neither is Jephthah. Jephthah's story does, nevertheless, end with the formula: "And after [Jephthah], Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel" (12:8).<sup>11</sup> This evidence is not as conclusive as it may first appear: *ipso facto* that Samson was the final judge, no one could be said to come after him. No less troubling for the thesis is the

<sup>8</sup> Robin Baker, *Hollow Men, Strange Women: Riddles, Codes and Otherness in the Book of Judges* (BINS 143; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 151.

<sup>9</sup> In addition, the disparity between the volume of information that the writer provides on Jephthah, who spent less time as judge than any of the minor judges, and their sketchy résumés, highlights the incongruity of his membership of their group. Compare Mullen, "'Minor Judges,'" 186 n. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (JSOTSup 68; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 83.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Hertzberg, *Bücher*, 209; Hauser, "'Minor Judges,'" 193.

existence of similar phraseology following the record of the book's second hero figure, Ehud: "and after him was Shamgar" (3:31).

Although comparative analysis reveals the weakness of each of Noth's points, there is no escaping the fact that the number associated with Jephthah in the role – six – does not conform to those associated with the other major judges.<sup>12</sup> This prompts the questions if Jephthah's number is not to be interpreted in terms of the minor judge set, how is it to be understood, and what might this reveal about the author's attitude to him?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider the related subject of the meaning of the numbers connected with the judge-heroes. Only with Jephthah and Samson do the year counts relate to periods of judging. Indeed, the book makes no mention of Ehud or Gideon actually "judging."<sup>13</sup> The years associated with Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, and Gideon refer to the intervals of peace that the land enjoyed resulting from their divinely inspired victories, namely, forty, eighty, forty, and forty years respectively.<sup>14</sup> It appears that no less important, and perhaps more important, an opposition for the book than rounded versus unrounded periods is years spent judging versus years spent enjoying the fruits of divine intervention. The conclusion to be drawn is that if the hero achieved something positive and long-lasting, this determines the year-record; if s/he did not, the years spent in

<sup>12</sup> On Jephthah's six-year term, see Willis, "Nature," 43-44.

<sup>13</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 410-31 (412 n. 6).

<sup>14</sup> Only in the instance of Gideon does the land's peace explicitly not outlive the champion (8:28), contra Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Framework and Discourse in the Book of Judges," *JBL* 128 (2009): 687-702 (693).

the role are given. The writer underscores this opposition by means of his characteristic wordplay:<sup>15</sup> the predicate “be at peace, rest” is שקט while שפט is the predicate “judge.” The former is a motif in the first half of the composition, thanks to the achievements of the divinely appointed leaders. It is absent in the second half in which Jephthah, who was in any case not divinely appointed (11:11, 29), and Samson, who was raised up by Yahweh but who profaned his sacred vocation, secure miraculous victories but to no lasting effect.<sup>16</sup> In its place, the word which, in Judges, possesses an opaque signification, שפט, is used.

Moreover, to underline the contrast, Jephthah’s six-year שפט tenure represents but one third of the length of time during which his adversaries, the sons of Ammon, “shattered and crushed” Jephthah’s people (10:8).<sup>17</sup> The שקט-שפט opposition elegantly intimates both Israel’s growing alienation from her god and the concomitant distortion of the judge-deliverer model that provide the book’s main theme.

The wordplay between these two key terms through the book’s central section (3:7-16:31) invites us to consider our strategy for reading the work. Noth’s thesis regarding Jephthah’s role in the composition is predicated on linearity: the fact that his story follows two figures who have features in common and is, in turn, followed by three further such figures is a major plank of his case for Jephthah’s membership of this group, although

<sup>15</sup> Compare Scott B. Noegel, “Paronomasia”, in *EHLL* vol. 3 (ed. Geoffrey Khan), 24-29 (24).

<sup>16</sup> Gillmayr-Bucher, “Framework,” 602; Alt, *Essays*, 178 n. 14; Block, *Judges*, 385. 1 Sam shows that Jephthah and Samson failed to eradicate the military threat to Israel posed by their respective enemies, the Ammonites and Philistines. This contrasts with the achievement of their predecessors.

<sup>17</sup> Alliterative wordplay characterizes this predicate pair also: וירעצו וירצצו.

Jephthah shares little of substance with them as a group. Such an approach does not give appropriate weight to the use of ring structures, inclusios, intra-textual parallelism, and cross-referencing, which many scholars recognize are rhetorical techniques employed widely in Judges.<sup>18</sup> The example of טפּש-טקש demonstrates that in this book, as in other ancient narrative works, a text needs to be evaluated contextually, not merely in terms of its immediately contiguous neighbours, but of the entire composition.<sup>19</sup> Mary Douglas remarks, concerning the Book of Numbers, that “it is rewarding to read Numbers [...] paying attention to the links connecting the parts to the whole structure instead of going from point to point in the linear sequence required in Western prose readings.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> David W. Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," in *Eretz-Israel, Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies: H. M. Orlinsky Volume* (Erlsr 16; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1982): 70-79; Younger, *Judges*; Block, *Judges*; Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges* (London: Routledge, 2002), 81; David M. Gunn, "Joshua and Judges," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; London: Fontana, 1987), 102-21 (117); J. Cheryl Exum, "Promise and Fulfilment: Narrative Art in Judges 13," *JBL* 99 (1980): 43-59; Baker, *Hollow Men*, 121-56.

<sup>19</sup> Compare J.G. McConville, "1 Kings VIII 46-53 and the Deuteronomic Hope," *VT* 42 (1992): 67-79 (78); Jan P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (trans. Ineke Smit; Leiderdorp: Deo, 1999), 116-7.

<sup>20</sup> *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 101.

One of the rhetorical devices used copiously in Judges is doubling which occurs both intra- and inter-episodically.<sup>21</sup> This observation is apposite for the Jephthah cycle.<sup>22</sup> I offer a few examples here, with others provided below in the discussion of Jephthah's dealings with the king of Ammon. The cycle begins and ends with references to Ephraimite territory (10:9; 12:1-6). Its hero is juxtaposed between two women whose relationship forms a chiasmus: his harlot mother and virgin daughter.<sup>23</sup> The word פליטי "fugitives (of)" occurs twice in Judges, in successive verses in the Jephthah section (12:4, 5).<sup>24</sup> Inter-episodically, features and figures found there are paralleled elsewhere, enabling one event to be viewed and interpreted through the lens of another.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the verb תנה "remember," a word unique to Judges, appears twice with subtly different meanings. In its first occurrence – in the Song of Deborah (5:11) – it denotes celebration. In its second, in the account of the annual festival to commemorate Jephthah's sacrificed daughter, it signifies "lament, mourn."<sup>26</sup> The four-day period of commemoration for her is reprised in the four days that the Levite spends in his father-in-law's house in Bethlehem, the prelude to the next act of violence against an Israelite woman recounted in the book (19:8-29).

<sup>21</sup> Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (trans. Jonathan Chipman; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 54-55. See Baker, *Hollow Men*, 58-59, 60, 77-83, for a discussion of the symbolism and rhetorical purpose of doubling in Judges.

<sup>22</sup> Compare Younger, *Judges*, 39-40.

<sup>23</sup> Klein, *Triumph*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Younger, *Judges*, 273.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas, *Wilderness*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Alice Logan, "Rehabilitating Jephthah," *JBL* 124 (2009): 665-85 (675).



While Jephthah shares specific traits with individual minor judges – he is a Gileadite like Jair, he and Ibzan alone among the judges are noted as having a daughter - the greatest number of correspondences between his story and those of other characters in the work are found in the accounts of Ehud and Abimelech respectively.<sup>27</sup> Alone among the narratives treating the book's major figures, these three end with the statement "and after him." Parallels between Jephthah and Ehud are largely antithetic; with Abimelech, on the other hand, they are primarily synthetic. Theodore Mullen observes that the Abimelech section "effects a complete change in the movement of the narrative. After each of the figures preceding Abimelech (excluding Shamgar), the land enjoyed a period of rest from one to two generations in length. After Abimelech, no periods of peace are noted."<sup>28</sup>

## II. Perturbing Alignments

Both Ehud and Jephthah massacre thousands of their enemies at the Jordan fords.<sup>29</sup> With the former, the victims are Israel's adversaries fleeing east. With Jephthah, they are his

<sup>27</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 298-9; 343-5.

On the parallels between Ehud and Jephthah, see Gooding, "Composition," 73.

<sup>28</sup> "'Minor Judges,'" 194.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Polzin notes the analogous word-play on the "pass over" and "transgress" meanings of עבר in the Ehud and Jephthah sections (*Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part One* [New York: Seabury Press, 1980], 180-1); compare Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2004), 194-5.

compatriots, fleeing west (3:28; 12:5-6). Ehud confronts a Moabite oppressor; the Philistines are the next enemy to arise against Israel (3:30-31). Jephthah battles an Ammonite oppressor; Israel's next foe is the Philistines (11:32-33; 13:1). The Moabites ruling Israel in Ehud's time were allied with the Ammonites (3:13). In both stories the period of oppression exercised by the respective "sons of Lot" is identical: eighteen years (3:14; 10:8).<sup>30</sup> Ehud goes twice to the king of Moab, on the second occasion twice promising "a message;" Jephthah sends messages twice to the king of Ammon. These embassies end in the defeat of Moab and Ammon respectively. The word דבר "word, message" (3:19-20; 11:26) is pregnant for both stories. Ehud and Jephthah make spectacular use of language as a means of trapping their adversaries, though, in a chiasmus, the latter is also himself trapped by it.<sup>31</sup> The alternation between Moab and Ammon is central to Jephthah's discourse on Israelite history. He confuses the head of the Ammonite pantheon (Milkom) with his Moabite counterpart, Kemosh.<sup>32</sup> He compares the Ammonite king with whom he is parleying with

<sup>30</sup> Compare C.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes* (2nd edn; London: Rivingtons, 1920), 295; Trent C. Butler, *Judges* (WBC 8; Nashville, 2009), 263.

<sup>31</sup> Dennis T. Olson, "The Book of Judges," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2 (ed. Leander E. Keck and David Petersen; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 721-888 (821). Jephthah's fateful entrapment of himself, his family, and his legacy through utterance is foreshadowed in his name יפתח "he will open" (i.e., his mouth) (J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* [Cambridge and New York, 1992], 48-49).

<sup>32</sup> Marc Zvi Brettler, "The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics," *JBL* 108 (1989): 395-418 (406); Yuriah Kim, "Postcolonial Criticism: Who Is the Other in the Book of Judges?" in

the Moabite king whom Moses faced (11:24-25). Moreover, a king of Moab is recorded in the Bible sacrificing his child as a holocaust (2 Kgs 3:26-27),<sup>33</sup> a cultic practice Jephthah performed.

Standing in ironic counterpoint to Jephthah's deed, the description of Ehud's assassination of the king of Moab, Eglon, the 'calf', is redolent of an act of sacrifice.<sup>34</sup> The term for the home-made blade with which Ehud kills Eglon - להב – is homonymous with the word for "flame."<sup>35</sup> We are, thus, offered a vivid contrast between Ehud's annihilation of the enemy as a divinely empowered action, and Jephthah's shedding of the blood of Israelite kin in a cultic practice associated with the peoples whom the Israelites were expected to drive from the land (Lev 18:21, 27-28).<sup>36</sup> Jephthah's slaying of the Ephraimites at the Jordan fords is expressed using the technical term for the sacrificial slaughter of animals, שחט, present in Judges only here. It offers an artful variant on the שחט-שפט parasonance which defines the essential contrast between Jephthah and Ehud's respective legacies in Israel.

*Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (2nd edn, ed. Gale A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 161-82 (176).

<sup>33</sup> 2 Kgs 3:27; Richter, "Überlieferungen," 513; Logan, "Rehabilitating," 669-70.

<sup>34</sup> Webb, *Book of Judges*, 165-6; Brettler, *Judges*, 29-33; contra Lawson G. Stone, "Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade: A Reconsideration," *JBL* 128 (2009): 649-63 (649, 655 n. 23).

<sup>35</sup> Note the alliteration between להב and החלב "fat" in 3:22 which serves to reinforce the sacrificial allusion. להב is encountered in 13:20 to denote the flame rising from a sacrifice.

<sup>36</sup> On dating this text, see J. Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: An Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17-26* (VTSup 67; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 9 n. 30.

As regards the parallels between Jephthah and Abimelech, the first feature of both characters to confront the reader is their unconventional relationship with their fathers (8:31; 11:1-2). Jephthah is a son of a prostitute and is disowned by his father's family. Abimelech is the son of his father's Shechemite concubine. He, too, appears to have been disowned by his father's family. Certainly, he disowns them.<sup>37</sup> Neither, however, escapes association with the paternal blood-line and, in different ways, it leads to their elevation and thence to their most egregious actions.<sup>38</sup> Lawson Younger lists further synthetic parallels between Abimelech and Jephthah:

Both recruit morally empty and reckless men to make up their armed gang (9:4; 11:3). Both are opportunists who negotiate their way into powerful leadership positions (9:1-6; 11:4-11). Both seal the agreement with their subjects in a formal ceremony at a sacred tree (9:6; 11:11). Both turn out to be brutal rulers, slaughtering their own relatives (9:5; 11:34-40) and engaging their own countrymen in battle (9:26-57; 12:1-6). Both end up as tragic figures without a future (9:50-57; 11:34-35).<sup>39</sup>

### III. Double Trouble

It is evident, then, that the Judges writer is concerned to establish a connection for Jephthah, the penultimate in the hero-series, with Ehud, the second in that company, and also with Abimelech, his immediate predecessor among the book's main characters. Unlike his Benjamite counterpart, Jephthah did not provide peace for Israel. Indeed, like

<sup>37</sup> See Klein, *Triumph*, 98-99, on the implications of fatherlessness in ancient Israel.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> *Judges*, 42; also Klein, *Triumph*, 83-84; Butler, *Judges*, 281, 295.

Abimelech, the cause of Israel's first civil war,<sup>40</sup> Jephthah is instrumental in the eruption of a second, even bloodier, one. In contrast to Ehud, both men performed some kind of recognized function in the community – Abimelech “ruled (וִישַׁר) over Israel for three years;” Jephthah “judged” Israel for six (9:22; 12:7). The foregoing discussion enables us to return to the questions I posed earlier: if Jephthah's number is not to be interpreted in terms of the minor judges, how is it to be understood, and what might this reveal about the author's attitude to him? Jephthah's year attribution is twice Abimelech's, exactly as the years associated with Ehud are, surprisingly, twice Othniel's (3:11, 30), the paragon judge-hero,<sup>41</sup> not to mention Deborah's and Gideon's. These facts are, I suggest, related and enable us to answer the first question. Jephthah's six years need to be understood as twice Abimelech's three. They are only tangentially related to the tenure periods of the minor judges whose brief notices act to frame and, thereby, focalize the Jephthah cycle in the book. By the same token, Ehud's achievement is presented to us as twice Othniel's in the benefit it brought to the land.

In the Hebrew Bible, doubling functions in the legal code as a principle of inheritance for the firstborn son (Deut 21:15-17),<sup>42</sup> and of restitution for a crime (Exod 22:3, 6, 8 [Eng. 4, 7, 9]). On a spiritual plane, it is an expression of divine confirmation, blessing, and

<sup>40</sup> Webb, *Book of Judges*, 283; Naftali Kraus, *Bírák és próféták: a zsidó nép őstörténete* (Budapest: Wesley János Kiadó, 2006), 58.

<sup>41</sup> Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (VTSup 63; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 83-84; Brettler, *Judges*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> See C.F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings with an Introduction and Appendix* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 265.

punishment (Gen 41:32; Zech 9:12; Isa 40:2; 61:7; Jer 17:18). Jeremiah proclaims the principle with searing clarity: “I will first recompense those who have defiled my land double for their iniquity and their sin” (16:18a).

Thus, the rendering of double in Yahwistic belief possesses emphatic, confirmatory, and retributive/reward aspects. Turning to Judges, the lavish use of pairings in the book has already been noted. In the writer’s schema, this provides a clue that doubling is significant in the interpretation of his composition. While this feature is ubiquitous, it can, however, only *allude* to the hermeneutical function of doubling. He makes it explicit in a typically artful way: by employing his characteristic cross-referencing technique.<sup>43</sup> And he does this in the opening verses of the book’s central section, which contains all the year counts. The first foreign enemy to oppress Yahweh’s people in the promised land was Cushan-rishathaim, Cushan “the doubly wicked,” or, as Susan Niditch translates it, “evil times two,” king of Aram Naharaim, “Syria of the Double Rivers.”<sup>44</sup> The author draws attention to the grammatical dual form of the oppressor’s name by repeating it in the name of his kingdom, thus furnishing a rare instance of a rhyming couplet in Judges which, again, serves to stress its importance.<sup>45</sup> The kingdom is translated “Mesopotamia” in the LXX, and this identification is

<sup>43</sup> Gunn, “Joshua,” 105-7; Baker, *Hollow Men*, 81, 114.

<sup>44</sup> *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 56. Trent Butler remarks: “Thus God gave Israel to Double Trouble” (*Judges*, 68); Block, *Judges*, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Brettler, *Judges*, 27; Noegel, “Paronomasia”, 27.

accepted by many commentators, ancient and modern.<sup>46</sup> Although Burney averred that Cushan-rishathaim is “a name which can scarcely be the product of mere invention,” and Abraham Malamat endeavoured to establish historical bona fides for him, nothing convincing has come of his and others’ attempts.<sup>47</sup> To emphasize further the doubling that Cushan-rishathaim represents, his name is repeated twice before Othniel is mentioned in this section, and twice after. Furthermore, it occurs precisely twice as many times as Othniel’s, ostensibly the episode’s lead-character.<sup>48</sup> Cushan-rishathaim also provides another service for the author: he introduces the subject of Mesopotamia, which will feature explicitly (18:30), and play an essential role implicitly, later in the book.

#### IV. Twice as Good, Twice as Bad

In a theology posited on peace and prosperity being the corollary of spiritual faithfulness to Yahweh and observance of his laws in dealings with one another, what was it about Ehud’s leadership which resulted in doubling the period of quietness delivered by his model predecessor or by the judge-cum-prophetess who followed him? The narrative tells

<sup>46</sup> Block, *Judges*, 152; Butler, *Judges*, 64-65. Josephus describes Cushan-rishathaim as “king of the Assyrians” (*Antiquities* V chap. 3.2). Younger, too, locates the kingdom in northern Mesopotamia (*Judges*, 104-5).

<sup>47</sup> Burney, *Judges*, 64-65; Malamat, “Cushan Rishathaim and the Decline of the Near East around 1200 BC,” *JNES* 13 (1954): 231-42. For a digest of the research, see Younger, *Judges*, 106-7. He describes the name as “a hebraized pejorative wordplay.”

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

us: Ehud succeeds in uniting Israel by inspiring Israelites to participate in the work of God.

The two verses in which Ehud makes his call to arms to his countrymen show them at one in following his leadership: “And when he came, he blew a shofar on Mount Ephraim, and the sons of Israel came down with him from the mountain and he went in front of them. And he said to them ‘Follow (after) me, for Yahweh has given your enemies, Moab, into your hand!’ And they went down after him” (3:27-28).

This account is strikingly different from the report of the campaigns of Othniel and Deborah. Although both Othniel and Ehud are said to have been “raised up by Yahweh to deliver Israel,” and, moreover, “the Spirit of God was upon” Othniel (3:9-10, 15), his story gives no indication that he united the people behind his leadership. The account of Othniel’s battle more closely resembles the Shamgar and Samson narratives in its unswerving focus on a single hero. The victory is won by Othniel operating under the power of God’s spirit: “he went out to fight,” “Yahweh delivered Cushan-rishathaim into his hand,” “his hand prevailed against Cushan” (3:10). Compare this unbroken recital of singular forms with the plural used in the corresponding Ehud portion: “into your (pl.) hand,” “they descended,” “they seized the fords,” “they did not let,” “they killed” (28-29). Ehud’s call is based on Moab being “your enemies,” to be vanquished by “your hand.” Once the Israelites obey his call, it is no longer Ehud plus Israel, let alone Ehud operating solo; the mission becomes Israel’s mission, and God’s appointed deliverer himself becomes simply a part of the united, conquering people of God.

The Deborah cycle differs from the Othniel episode. Like Ehud, she seeks to muster the Israelites, or at least the northern tribes. But she encounters opposition from some quarters (5:23), and half the tribes she summons prefer to be passive bystanders in the



conflict (5:15-17).<sup>49</sup> Moreover, even from her own prophetically nominated commander, Baraq, she faces equivocation (4:8-9). Gideon achieved unity in Israel only after the conflict with Midian, but used it to subvert Yahwism by promoting a syncretized version (8:22-27). This initiative gained him great personal popularity during his lifetime but with the ultimate result that the peace in the land was violently shattered on his death and his memory disdained (8:28-9:5).

The message of Judges is that the unity of God's people, participating to achieve his purpose, was the determinant in doubling the period of peace following Ehud's victory. Such unity is witnessed also in the book's opening verse. The tower of Babel story, in which Yahweh states "The people are one, they have one vernacular; [...] and now they are able to do everything that they purpose without restraint" (Gen 11:6), is a reminder that, according to this theology, human unity represents the most potent force on earth. Ehud's distinction lies in melding that unity with the celestial purpose and power, and this gives the meaning to the eighty-year peace.

The double appearance of אחרי "after" in 3:28, articulated first in Ehud's command and then in the sons of Israel's obedience to that command, links the narrative to the other two major figures with whom, as we have seen, the word is identified, Abimelech and Jephthah. It is to them we now turn. Wolfgang Bludorn suggests that the manner in which Abimelech's three-year rule is introduced bears more resemblance to the periods of oppression ascribed to Israel's foreign enemies than to her leaders. His argument is that, whereas the periods of the latter come at the end of their sections, those relating to the former appear at the beginning. Notwithstanding that he overstates the case – Abimelech is

<sup>49</sup> Gregory T.K. Wong, "The Song of Deborah as Polemic," *Biblica* 88 (2007): 1-22.

first mentioned in 8:31, arrives in Shechem in 9:1, and his year count is supplied only in 9:22 – Bluedorn’s point holds, and is buttressed by his second observation, viz., that the period is conspicuous by being the shortest of any in Judges.<sup>50</sup> To my knowledge, no commentators, irrespective of whether they perceive Judges to contain a pro- or anti-monarchy ideology, have suggested that Abimelech’s three-year rule brought benefit to the land and its people.<sup>51</sup> Before it, with the exception of the victims of Gideon’s retributive action at Penuel and Succoth which began the pattern of vindictive oppression by Israelite leaders of their own people, no Israelite blood is reported to have been shed by a compatriot in the Judges era. Abimelech changed this. His period began with the murder of seventy apparently innocent men and the dishonoring of his father; it ended with a civil war and the destruction of Israel’s main city in the Settlement era, Shechem. The narrative is exceptionally outspoken in assigning guilt to him and his Shechemite allies, and in describing the consequent divine retribution on them both.<sup>52</sup> Ergo, beyond the formal markers, the evidence agrees with Bluedorn that Abimelech’s three-year spell as ruler more closely

<sup>50</sup> *Yahweh versus Baalism: A Theological Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative*

(JSOTSup 329; London: Sheffield University Press, 2001), 231-2. See also Block, *Judges*, 322.

<sup>51</sup> Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 6A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975): 170.

<sup>52</sup> Polzin, *Moses*, 174-5; Block, *Judges*, 355; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 268; T.A. Boogaart, “Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem,” *JSOT* 32 (1985): 45-56 (49).

resembles the periods of foreign oppression than the intervals associated with the leadership of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, and Gideon.<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to this father, Abimelech displayed scant regard for cult. His most egregious iniquities were dishonoring his father (and, ultimately, his mother) and the blood-pollution of the promised land. The gravity of this offence cannot be overstated. The law considers the spilling of Israelite blood without cause a heinous transgression against Yahweh and a gross desecration of the land itself, and, consequently, injurious to the sanctity of its people: “You shall not pollute the land where you are going, for it is blood that pollutes the land, and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed in it except by the blood of him who shed it. Do not defile the land therefore which you will inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell, for I am Yahweh who dwells in the midst of the sons of Israel” (Num 35:33–34).

Thus, this sin renders the land unfit for the habitation of a holy god.<sup>54</sup> In consequence, its perpetration posed a threat to the entire divine plan surrounding the Settlement, which was intended to enable the Israelites to dwell in the land divinely promised to their forefathers in the presence and worship of Yahweh, and enjoying his blessings. Steps were taken in the legal code, through the establishment of cities of refuge

<sup>53</sup> Samson presents an anomaly for this assessment because, not only did the foreign power continue to oppress Israel during his insurgency, but his year attribution, like Abimelech’s, is stated (first) midway through his story (15:20; 16:31).

<sup>54</sup> William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on Religion of the Semites* (3rd edn; New York: Macmillan, 1927), 428-9; 446; compare Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131.

(one of which was Shechem), to prevent this sin being committed (Deut 9:1-13; Josh 20).<sup>55</sup>

Its expiation required the capital punishment of the perpetrator. God brings about the violent deaths of Abimelech and his erstwhile accomplices (9:56-57), thus cleansing the land. Abimelech, then, achieved the opposite of Ehud: he fractured the nation, beginning with his own family,<sup>56</sup> and, in the process, defiled the land.

The proposition I am advancing is that the sins committed, the desecration effected, and the damage done to Israel's sanctity and cohesion by Jephthah were qualitatively and quantitatively worse than those perpetrated by Abimelech. He was "doubly wicked," and this is signalled by his year attribution being twice Abimelech's. Exceptionally among all those given in Judges for Israel's leaders, these two men's year-counts did not attain seven years. The implications of this are considerable since the seventh year was the time when the achievement of rest for the land (Lev 25:2-7, 20-21) and its people (Jer 12:12-22), as well as Yahweh's ownership of the land, were celebrated.<sup>57</sup> The symbolic import of the tenure

<sup>55</sup> So grave a transgression was blood-pollution held to be that, on the charge sheet against King Manasseh explaining Yahweh's decision to "abandon what remains of my inheritance [Judah] and give them into the hand of their foes as booty and spoil," was the crime that the king had flooded Jerusalem with innocent blood (2 Kgs 21:14-16).

<sup>56</sup> On the debate concerning the degree to which Shechem had a Canaanite population, see Brettler, "Literature," 406. Robert O'Connell (*Rhetoric*, 155) maintains that Abimelech's mother was Canaanite.

<sup>57</sup> Biblical evidence indicates that the sabbatical year was observed in pre-exilic Israel (B.Z. Wacholder, "Sabbatical Year," in *IDB Supplementary Volume* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1976], 762-3).

periods of Abimelech and Jephthah is that they provided no rest and no peace for either land or people, corroborating the observation offered earlier.

Jephthah is principally remembered in literature, both exegetical and creative, for his vow resulting in the sacrifice of his daughter. Although the commentaries generally condemn the vow and sacrifice,<sup>58</sup> there have been many attempts to exonerate Jephthah, mainly by suggesting that the killing of his daughter did not literally occur,<sup>59</sup> or that Jephthah did immolate her, but out of foolishness not degeneracy.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, his apparent abjectness on recognizing that it is she whom he must sacrifice in order to fulfil his vow to Yahweh suggests that it sprang from the former not the latter, though, as Cheryl Exum observes, it is noteworthy that he does not consider an alternative.<sup>61</sup> Besides, this argument goes, is not Yahweh equally culpable because he permitted or, perhaps, engineered the series of events which culminated in the daughter's holocaust, and did not himself provide an alternative, as he did with Abraham?<sup>62</sup> Exum states: "Jephthah is the worst of the lot [of judges], but not merely through a fault of his own."<sup>63</sup> Some scholars have argued that, in

<sup>58</sup> David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Malden MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 134-69.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-42, 147-53.

<sup>60</sup> See Logan, "Rehabilitating," 665-6; Tony W. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup 147; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 177-85.

<sup>61</sup> "Centre," 422; eadem, *Tragedy*, 50.

<sup>62</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 16-17. The question is perceptively explored in Block, *Judges*, 370-9.

<sup>63</sup> Exum, "Centre," 421 n. 22; eadem, *Tragedy*, 48, 60.

certain circumstances, the sacrifice of one's child in the context of religious practice in Syro-Palestine was an acceptable expression of Yahwistic belief, and may have been a characteristic of popular Yahwism in the mid-first millennium BC.<sup>64</sup> The muted nature of the description of Jephthah's child sacrifice is thus to be understood as the narrator's tacit endorsement of Jephthah's deed.<sup>65</sup> The account perhaps intimates that the vow and its fulfilment were even animated by Yahweh's spirit which had come upon the warrior.<sup>66</sup>

Discussion of the claim that child-sacrifice was native to, and a feature of, pre-exilic Yahwism lies outside this essay's scope. Its focus concerns what the Judges writer's stance was on such practices,<sup>67</sup> and, specifically, how that stance is conveyed through the Jephthah story. In fact, Judges offers no approbation of cultic practices associated with the surrounding peoples - such as "passing children through the fire," a rite repeatedly condemned in the Bible.<sup>68</sup> The writer reveals his attitude to the paedicide by the rhetorical framing he uses to set the episode, namely, the description of the religious mores prevailing in Israel, and Yahweh's condemnation of them, in the section that introduces the Jephthah cycle (10:6-18). Jephthah's willingness to make the vow, in the knowledge that the

<sup>64</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *Manasseh*, 194-6; eadem, "The Jerusalem Tophet: Ideological Dispute and Religious Transformation," *SEL* 29-30 (2012-2013): 137-58; Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 139-43; Logan, "Rehabilitating;" Levenson, *Death*, 4-5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>66</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *Manasseh*, 195; eadem, "Tophet," 147-8.

<sup>67</sup> Compare Levenson, *Death*, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Richter, "Überlieferungen," 513; Ackerman, *Popular Religion*, 117.

holocaust of his daughter was at least a potential outcome, and to carry it out to the letter, as well as his daughter's acceptance of her fate as a reasonable expression of piety exemplify how thoroughly by Jephthah's time the rites and rituals associated with the gods of *inter alia* Sidon (i.e., Phoenicia), Moab, and Ammon (10:6)<sup>69</sup> had been absorbed into Israelite cult. In recounting Jephthah's actions, as in his treatment of Gideon and Samson,<sup>70</sup> Micah and Jonathan, the writer does not burden his composition with moralizing commentary. Rather, he allows the narrative to speak for itself, through the context it supplies and the aftermath it describes. His views, where intimated, are more likely to be conveyed obliquely, often, as we have seen, using heuristic devices than by explicit statement. This nuanced rhetorical strategy, however, in no way betrays theological heterodoxy. The theology of Judges is that of a strict Yahwist writing in the seventh century

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 120-5; Frank Moore Cross, "A Phoenician Inscription from Idalion: Some Old and New Texts Relating to Child Sacrifice," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays in Honor of Philip J. King* (ed. Michael D. Coogan et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 93-107.

<sup>70</sup> Like Gideon and Samson, Jephthah is mentioned in the New Testament (Heb 11:32-34) in a discourse on what mortals can effect by faith in God (cf. Jas 5:17-18). The men cited here appear on account of their faith, not necessarily their righteousness, as long ago Chrysostom recognized: "Some find fault with Paul, because he puts Barak, and Samson, and Jephthah in these places. [...] For do not tell me of the rest of their life, but only whether they did not believe and shine in Faith" (St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [[http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d\\_0345-0407](http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d_0345-0407) accessed 03/03/2017]).

BC, probably, as Alice Logan contends, during Manasseh's reign.<sup>71</sup> One of her arguments for ascribing this date to the text is precisely that child immolation as a religious rite was a feature of that king's rule (2 Kgs 21:6; 23:10).<sup>72</sup> It therefore possessed a topicality at that time which is given expression in the Jephthah account, even as blood-pollution also is. In one of the few references to the Judges era elsewhere in the Bible, the exilic Psalm 106 (34-39) associates it with child-sacrifice and the blood-pollution of the land.<sup>73</sup> Of all the individuals mentioned in Judges, Jephthah alone is identified with this combination of deeds. The psalmist regarded the combination as the nadir of wickedness, and a metonym for all that Yahweh condemned in Israelite conduct.<sup>74</sup> One may conclude, then, that in the exilic period, and, on the evidence of Jeremiah (7:30-32; 19:5; 32:35) and Ezekiel (16:21; 20:31; 23:39), in the period that preceded it, such Yahwists considered child-sacrifice an abomination. The Judges author is no exception.

The Judges treatment of Jephthah reveals an individual who, with each step, strays further from Yahweh's standards. The holocaust of his child leads to the event that concludes his story, namely the Gileadite-Ephraimite war (12:1-6).<sup>75</sup> It has attracted less attention, overshadowed, as it is, by the pathos of the daughter-sacrifice. In addition, the

<sup>71</sup> Logan, "Rehabilitating," 668, 684-5.

<sup>72</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 2001), 529.

<sup>73</sup> On the date of the psalm, see Tzvi Novick, "Law and Loss: Response to Catastrophe in Numbers 15," *HTR* 101 (2008): 1-14 (9-10).

<sup>74</sup> Compare Bennie H. Reynolds, "What are Demons of Error: The Meaning of שִׂדֵי טְעוּתָא and Israelite Child Sacrifices," *Revue de Qumrân* 22 (2006): 593-613 (607-11).

<sup>75</sup> Exum, *Tragedy*, 53.



appearance of “shibboleth” within the report has tended to divert attention from the story itself. Yet it is as great a transgression against normative Yahwism as the paedicide. In this conflict, Jephthah oversees the slaughter of forty-two thousand Israelites. This, as Butler observes, constitutes a greater body count than all the foreign enemies killed by all the judges combined.<sup>76</sup> The blood-pollution, which began on a limited scale in Gideon’s assault on Succoth and Penuel, and then escalated during Abimelech’s three years, becomes endemic as a result of Jephthah’s actions. God acted to purge the land of Abimelech’s defilement by the inflicted deaths of the perpetrators. But in the aftermath of the orgy of idolatry in which the Israelites participate before the Jephthah section, Yahweh declares “you have left me and served other gods. Therefore, I will no longer save you” (10:13). He does not intervene again to cleanse the land but withdraws increasingly from it and his people. Ps 78:55-60, another text that treats the Settlement era, describes Yahweh abandoning his people in response to their provocation and idolatry. William Schniedewind argues compellingly that the text derives from Hezekiah’s reign.<sup>77</sup> If so, the notion that the latter part of the Settlement era experienced divine abandonment was current in the theological discourse in Jerusalem at the time Judges was composed.

<sup>76</sup> *Judges*, 300. It also very significantly exceeds the total of Benjamites killed by Israel in the final and bloodiest of the civil wars described in Judges (20:35; 46). Barry Webb (*Book of Judges*, 340 n. 93) holds that the number of Benjamite casualties was 50,100, but this overlooks the fact that the entire Benjamite force at the commencement of hostilities is 26,700 (20:15-16).

<sup>77</sup> *Society and the Promise to David: The Reception History of 2 Samuel 7:1-17* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66-69.

If the repercussions of Jephthah's leadership were limited to the pollution of the land by carrying out a prohibited act of child-sacrifice and the extermination of a vast number of Israelites, they would be grave enough. But he compounds these deeds to promote factionalism. Again, the precursor to this aspect of his story is found in Abimelech's actions. To achieve his ambition, Abimelech incites a conflict between the maternal and paternal branches of his family. Jephthah takes this further, championing tribalism rather than the unity of Israel. His appeal is in any case limited to Gilead and Manasseh (the tribe of Abimelech), and although he claims to have called on the Ephraimites to join him in the battle against the Ammonites, the text belies this (11:29; 12:2-3).<sup>78</sup> Webb acutely describes the way in which Jephthah turns the vexatious complaint that the Ephraimites level against him into an intertribal conflict, aggravating already febrile intercommunal relations.<sup>79</sup> In a morbid caricature of the united Israelites vanquishing their Moabite oppressors at the Jordan fords, the narrative relates that "all the men of Gilead," marshalled by Jephthah, "battled the Ephraimites and the men of Gilead struck Ephraim." [...] "Gilead captured the Jordan fords" [...] "The men of Gilead said 'Are you an Ephraimite?' If he replied 'No,' they said to him 'Then say shibboleth.'" [...] "Then they seized him and slaughtered him (טנש) at the Jordan fords" (12:4-6).

That slaughter of the Ephraimites demonstrates that the integrity of Israel as one people composed of twelve tribes united in the worship of one God was no longer valued. It portended the violent fragmentation of the sons of Israel on tribal lines, and ultimately the

<sup>78</sup> Soggin, *Judges*, 207; Willis, "Nature," 42-43; Block, *Judges*, 382.

<sup>79</sup> *Book of Judges*, 339; see also Hertzberg, *Bücher*, 218.

eradication of the concept of the sons of Israel as a living entity.<sup>80</sup> The consequences of this would be played out in a variable geometry for the rest of Judges and through the books of Samuel and Kings, until the ten tribes, which included both combatants of Judges 12, were torn from the land in the Assyrian deportation, in recent memory of the writer. It is, perhaps, significant that among the first to go, in the deportations carried out by Tiglath-pileser III, were the Israelite inhabitants of Gilead.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the Transjordanian tribes are not included in the list of those who, in Jeremiah's prophecy, would offer sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple (17:26).<sup>82</sup>

## V. Conspicuous Lisps

The mention of the Assyrians and shibboleth brings me to the consideration of their place in the narrative. Scholars who seek in the shibboleth story an excoriation of Ephraim to support an assertion that Judges represents a polemic against the northern kingdom are right only insofar as the narrative looks forward.<sup>83</sup> But it looks forward further than such

<sup>80</sup> Baker, *Hollow Men*, 242.

<sup>81</sup> E.W. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 101-2; K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "The Repopulation of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24, 27-31)," in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions* (ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 254-80 (254-5).

<sup>82</sup> Bustenay Oded, "II Kings 17: Between History and Polemic," *Jewish History* 2 (1987): 37-50 (41-42).

<sup>83</sup> Brettler, "Literature," 408; of Judges more generally as an anti-Ephraimite polemic, Brian P. Irwin, "Not Just Any King: Abimelech, the Northern Monarchy, and the Final Form of

verdicts allow. It does not end with the kings of Israel but has in view the destruction of the twelve tribes as a community through the deportations of the late eighth century, as intimated by the remark about them in 18:30. This verse constitutes the sole reference to a datable near-contemporary event in Judges.

Important work has been done on analysing the sound processes which may have caused the reported dialect difference in the pronunciation of word-initial /š/ in pre-high vocalic position in the word *šibbōlet*/שבילת. Whether the articulatory phenomenon manifested in the Ephraimites' irregular pronunciation is best explained as the result of a phonological process or simply as phonetic variation awaits resolution.<sup>84</sup> To my understanding, though, the writer's purpose in relaying this episode was not chiefly to record a curiosity of Hebrew historical dialectology, albeit one with savage consequences. Rather, he inserts it into his composition because of the resonance it would have with his (immediate) readership. Consistent with the theological and prophetic purpose with which he approached his task, the writer uses *šibbōlet* to cast light on the vast implications of Jephthah's sin. The writer has already prepared the ground with the play on pivotal words

Judges," *JBL* 131 (2012): 443-54; Block, *Judges*, 384, 386; Younger, *Judges*, 274. Note also Alexander Rofé, "Ephraimite versus Deuteronomistic History," in *Storia e Tradizioni di Israele: Scritti in Onore di J. Alberto Soggin* (ed. D. Garrone and F. Israel; Brescia: Paideia, 1991), 221-35.

<sup>84</sup> The weight of opinion is toward the latter. See Ronald S. Hendel, "Sibilants and *šibbōlet* (Judges 12:6)," *BASOR* 301 (1996): 69-75; Robert Woodhouse, "The Biblical Shibboleth Story in the Light of Late Egyptian Perceptions of Semitic Sibilants: Reconciling Divergent Views," *JAOS* 123 (2003): 271-89.

with initial /š/ that differentiate Jephthah and Samson from their successful predecessors. To underscore the connection he inserts another, שחט, as discussed above, precisely in the sentence that follows שבלת. Then, in the following verse, he positions שפט in the - for this study - focal clause “and Jephthah judged Israel for six years” (12:7). The phoneme /š/, which the event at the Jordan fords has exposed as deadly in the world in which Jephthah holds sway, shushes through the phrase שש שנים (šēš šānîm) “six years.” Moreover, to reinforce the connection between /š/, the six years, and Jephthah with death, the next statement in the narrative is, in literal translation, “and died Jephthah the Gileadite.”

Of all the lexemes with initial /š/ in biblical Hebrew, the question must be asked why שבלת was the password of choice.<sup>85</sup> The Judges author deployed it in the knowledge that his audience would bring to their reception of his tale associations with the term that they already possessed.<sup>86</sup> With allusions between biblical texts, there is often the conundrum of

<sup>85</sup> Compare Klein, *Triumph*, 97; Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges, Ruth: Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1968), 151.

<sup>86</sup> Among the many examples of discussions of artful parallels with other biblical texts found in Judges, see Burney, *Judges*, 443-5; Moshe Garsiel, “Homiletic Name-Derivations as a Literary Device in the Gideon Narrative: Judges VI-VIII,” *VT* 43 (1993): 302-17 (314-6); Walter Beyerlin, “Geschichte und heilgeschichtliche Traditionsbildung im Alten Testament: Ein Beitrag zur Traditionsgeschichte von Richter VI-VIII,” *VT* 13 (1963): 1-25 (9-10); Geoffrey P. Miller, “Verbal Feud in the Hebrew Bible: Judges 3:12-30 and Judges 19-21,” *JNES* 55 (1996): 105-17 (110-12); Webb, *Judges, Integrated*, 148-53; Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 29-33; A. Graeme Auld, “Gideon: Hacking at the Heart of the Old Testament,” *VT* 39 (1989): 257-67

relative chronology. In the case in question, however – the story describing the relations between the original sons of Israel, the forefathers of the twelve tribes – the relationship between Judges and the source goes well beyond general allusion. Specific lexemes from the Genesis narrative are exploited artfully by the writer to provide a “sacred-historical” context for the Judges account, indicating that he was familiar with a text not dissimilar from the version we know.<sup>87</sup> It is this narrative which furnishes the first mention of שבלת in the Bible, in the episode recounting Pharaoh’s dreams; specifically that of the seven lush and good *heads of grain* (שבלת) followed by the seven wasted *heads of grain* blasted by the east wind which swallowed up the former (Gen 41: 5-7). Pharaoh repeats this to Joseph (22-

(257-8); Ken Stone, “Gender Criticism: The Un-Manning of Abimelech,” in *Judges*, ed. Yee, 183-201 (197-8); Gregory T.K. Wong, “Gideon: A New Moses?” in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld* (ed. R. Rezetko et al.; VTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 529-46.

<sup>87</sup> Eckart Frahm posits that this narrative in Genesis was written in the wake of King Esarhaddon’s accession to the Assyrian throne (680 BC), i.e., during the reign of Manasseh (“‘And His Brothers were Jealous of Him:’ Surprising Parallels between Joseph and King Esarhaddon,” *BAR* 42/3 [2016]: 43-64). If he is correct, it is approximately contemporary with Judges. See also Jan Joosten, “The Distinction between Classical and Late Biblical Hebrew as Reflected in Syntax,” *Hebrew Studies* 46 (2005): 327-39 (339); idem, “YHWH’s Farewell to Northern Israel (Micah 6, 1-8),” *ZAW* 125 (2013): 1-15 (7-8). Schniedewind (*Society*, 70) avers that explicit textual citation of the type evinced by Judges with regard to the Joseph narrative begins only from the seventh century. He, too, dates the Joseph account to that century (op. cit., 101-2).

24). In all, the word in its plural form שבלים appears ten times and thus equates with the number of brothers who come to seek grain from Joseph. The result of his interpreting the dream in which שבלת is the focus makes the difference between life and death, as in Judges 12.<sup>88</sup> Joseph is given an Egyptian wife, Asenath, and she bears him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, in Egypt. We are explicitly told that both are born in the years of plenty, the years of the good שבלים before the desiccating wind blows from the east (41:50). Joseph names the first Manasseh because God had enabled him to forget his vexation and “all his father’s house,” and the second Ephraim because God had caused him to be fruitful. Thus, the divinely-inspired handling of שבלת provided Joseph’s passport from prison to vizier and the engendering of Ephraim, as well as Israel’s from famine and certain death to plenty. Judah declares the position plainly: “we will go [to Egypt] that we might live and not die, we, you [Jacob], and our children” (Gen 43:8). The dream interpretation also, ultimately, brought about the reunification of the sons of Israel, ruptured by their betrayal of Joseph. In Judges, the term “House of Joseph” applies exclusively to Ephraim (1:22, 35).<sup>89</sup> The correspondence between Judges 12 and the Joseph narrative is echoed in another lexical root which is pivotal in the scene at the Jordan fords: פלט. In Joseph’s account of his divinely ordained role, he affirms that “God sent me before you to cause you to live by means of a great

<sup>88</sup> For a discussion of wordplay in the accounts of dreams interpreted by Joseph, see André Caquot, “Les songes et leur interprétation selon Canaan et Israël,” in *Les songes et leur interprétation* (ed. Anne-Marie Esnoul et al.; Paris, 1959), 99-124 (112-5).

<sup>89</sup> Gray, *Judges*, 240; Zecharia Kallai, “The Settlement Traditions of Ephraim: A Historiographical Study,” *ZDPV* 102 (1986): 68-74 (70).

*escape*” (Gen 45:7). Thus, the section which begins with the appearance of the שבליים is concerned throughout with the vivification and unification of the sons of Israel.

Jephthah’s slaughter of the members of the House of Joseph is the mirror image of Joseph’s life-saving act toward Jephthah’s forebears. He dealt death to the escapees, and this deed, as discussed above, signalled the destruction of the sons of Israel as an entity, thereby reversing Joseph’s divine achievement. Moreover, the Genesis narrative features the word *jephthah* יפתח(ו) at critical points in the plot. Following the report of the birth of Ephraim (41:52), Joseph “*opened* all the storehouses” (v. 56), a phrase which, as it were, juxtaposes the two names: יפתח יוסף. It was this act that led to his brothers’ journey to Egypt (v. 57). The lexeme occurs when the brothers open their sacks (42:27; 43:21), with its final attestation found in the denouement of the tale of Joseph and his brothers, when sacks are again opened and Benjamin’s contains Joseph’s cup (44:12).

The evidence indicates, then, that the Judges writer harnessed the text which contains the birth of Ephraim, the reunification of the sons of Israel after their first rejection of (the house of) Joseph,<sup>90</sup> and the act of Yahweh-inspired deliverance performed by Joseph for Israel to project in sharp relief the scale of Jephthah’s sin and of its deleterious consequences for the cohesion of God’s people. He became the death-delivering east wind for Israel. The parallel treating the beginning of the tribes reinforces the conclusion reached above regarding the meaning of a year attribution double Abimelech’s: it conveys that Jephthah was “evil times two” in the injury he caused Israel.

<sup>90</sup> The trait of the “bratty upstart,” with which Marc Zvi Brettler characterizes the Ephraimites in Judges (“Literature,” 408), is apt for the precocious Joseph. It fuelled his rejection by his brothers (Gen 37:8).



The account of the Ephraimites' pronunciation of /š/ as /s/ in the shibboleth episode had an additional resonance for the writer's contemporary audience, one which was especially topical. As Brettler notes, "Ephraim" functioned as a synecdoche for the northern kingdom.<sup>91</sup> At the time Judges was composed, the ten tribes comprising "Ephraim" had been uprooted and removed to the reaches of the Assyrian empire.<sup>92</sup> The degree of assimilation of these Israelites to their Assyrian environments appears to have been both great and rapid: "Israel is swallowed up; now they are found among the peoples, a vessel undesired. They have gone up to Assyria" (Hos 8:8-9a).<sup>93</sup> As the good שבילים were swallowed up (בלע) by the bad, so these tribes were swallowed up (בלע) by Assyria, the paradigmatic "unclean land" (Amos 7:17).<sup>94</sup> As a consequence of processes that have their roots in

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.; Heath D. Dewrell, "Yareb, Shalman, and the Date of the Book of Hosea," *CBQ* 78 (2016): 413-29 (428-9).

<sup>92</sup> Bustenay Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979), 30. That the number of tribes deported equals the number of mentions of שבילים in the Genesis account perhaps invites reflection.

<sup>93</sup> "The relative low number of Israelite deportees traced back might be an indication of the process of assimilation to the culture of Assyria. It can be surmised that during this process parents increasingly gave their children non-YHWH-istic names, and even Assyrian names" (Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria* [SHAN 2; Leiden: Brill, 1992], 93). See also Shalom M. Paul, "Sargon's Administrative Diction in II Kings 17:27," *JBL* 88 (1969): 73-74; Oded, *Deportations*, 31, 85; H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984), 263-4.

<sup>94</sup> Julian Morgenstern, "Amos Studies I," *HUCA* 11 (1936): 19-140 (54, 94).

Judges, Ephraim, whose name celebrates Joseph's fruitfulness in the land of his affliction, was exiled in affliction and made barren: "Within sixty-five years, Ephraim will be destroyed from being a people" (Isa 7:8a).

What is the link between this and the Ephraimites' pronunciation of /š/ as /s/? An innovation that distinguishes the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian from other varieties is the sound change š > s.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, as Robert Woodhouse comments, the Assyrians "heard all West Semitic /š/ as /s/."<sup>96</sup> Thus, "the Hebrew name Hosea, realized as <sup>m</sup>ú-si-a, <sup>m</sup>ú-se-e' and <sup>m</sup>ú-si-i, in Neo-Assyrian cuneiform, is lemmatized as *Ūsēa'* [in the *Prosopography*], even though it was certainly pronounced *Hōšēa'* in Hebrew [...]. The correlation *Ūsēa'* = *Hōšēa'* shows that the NA /s/ corresponds to the Hebr. /š/."<sup>97</sup> We may confidently assert, therefore, that the Assyrian pronunciation of *šubultu*, "ear of barley," the Akkadian cognate of *šibbōlet*,<sup>98</sup> had word-initial /s/. The Assyrians manifested the feature that distinguished the Ephraimites cornered by Jephthah. Put differently, in the narratology of Judges, the Ephraimites' pronunciation of *šibbōlet* as *sibbōlet* symbolizes the destiny of all the northern tribes known by the collective designation "Ephraim," as assimilated to Assyria, "swallowed

<sup>95</sup> Stephanie Dalley, "dNIN.LÍL = *mul(l)is(s)u*, the Treaty of Barga'yah, and Herodotus' Mylitta," *RA* 73 (1979): 177-8; Michael L. Barré, "The First Pair of Deities in the Sefire I God-List," *JNES* 44 (1985): 205-10 (205, 207 n. 11); Paul V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 156.

<sup>96</sup> "Shibboleth," 276-7, especially nn. 20 and 21.

<sup>97</sup> *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire [PNA]*, vol. 1/IA (ed. Karen Radner; Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1998), xxii; see also xxiv.

<sup>98</sup> *CAD* Š/3, 186.

up” in an alien culture, and removed forever from the promised land.<sup>99</sup> They were, thus, ultimately destroyed by “the king of Mesopotamia,” the successor of their first oppressor.

<sup>99</sup> There is robust evidence that the seventh-century scribal community in Jerusalem was familiar with Akkadian and recognized Assyrian dialect traits. In Isa 20:1, the name of the Assyrian king, Sargon II, is given as *sargôn*, reproducing the Assyrian dialect treatment of the initial phoneme, rather than reflecting *šarru-kēnu/šarru-kīn*, the Babylonian form used in Assyrian royal inscriptions (D.G. Lyon, *Keilschrifttexte Sargon's, Königs von Assyrien (722-705 v. CHR.)* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1883], ix-x; *PNA* 3/2, 1239-40; Alan Millard, “‘Take a Large Writing Tablet and Write on It’: Isaiah – a Writing Prophet?” in *Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms: A Festschrift to Honour Professor John Emerton for his Eightieth Birthday* [ed. Katharine J. Dell et al.; VTSup 135; Leiden: Brill, 2010], 105-17 [114]). Assyrian and Babylonian were a fertile source of lexical borrowings into Hebrew (Mankowski, *Loanwords*); Mesopotamian literary models influenced biblical textuality (David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], 304). Christopher Hays argues that a knowledge of Akkadian informed First Isaiah (*Death in the Iron Age II and in First Isaiah* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011], 25); see also Noam Mizrahi, “The Textual History and Literary Background of Isa 14,4,” *ZAW* 125 (2013): 433-47 (444-7). In the eighth and seventh centuries BC, the influence of the Assyrian legal system on commerce in Syro-Palestine was immense. After the destruction of the northern kingdom, Assyrian garrisons were located in proximity to Jerusalem (Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation* [AB 11; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988], 210-11; Hans Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982], 308; Mordechai Cogan, “Into Exile,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* [ed. Michael D.

As Hosea proclaims, Ephraim “will not return to the land of Egypt; the Assyrian will be his king” (Hos 11:5).<sup>100</sup>

## VI. Concluding Remarks

The Judges 10:6 list of the gods of the surrounding nations to which Israel adhered in preference to Yahweh is unprecedented in its detail. Moreover, it forms the literal center of the book of Judges according to the Masoretic verse count. In the composition’s rhetorical plan, similarly, it constitutes the fulcrum in the account of the relations between Yahweh and his people.<sup>101</sup> The worship of these deities and the syncretistic application of aspects of

Coogan; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 242-75 [254, 257]; Schniedewind, *Society*, 56-57, 96-97).

<sup>100</sup> Compare Anthony R. Ceresko, “The Function of Chiasmus in Hebrew Poetry,” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 1-10 (3); John Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 385-408 (404).

<sup>101</sup> Compare Mullen, ““Minor Judges,”” 196-7. Possibly, the writer’s play on the word-medial radical in the crucial lexical set שפט-שקט through the book’s central section subtly points to the key function that its literal center fulfils in elucidating its meaning. On the role of “extended” paronomasia in the Hebrew Bible, see J.M. Sasson, “Wordplay in the Old Testament,” *IDB Sup. Vol.*, 968-70; Scott B. Noegel, ““Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign’: Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East,” in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (ed. Amar Annus; OIS 6; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 143-62 (149). On the hermeneutical significance of the midpoint of biblical

their cults to normative Yahwism provoke the response from Israel's god that he will deliver them no more and that they should "appeal to the gods you have chosen" for deliverance. This rupture in the relationship sets the scene for Jephthah's ascendancy. The Gileadites, in extremis, take the initiative to engineer a human solution to a divine problem by approaching Jephthah, a social outcast with proven leadership and combat skills.<sup>102</sup> As detailed above, Jephthah's attitudes and deeds, far from redressing the balance, legitimized a syncretistic practice of the most baneful kind. His understanding of Yahweh is profoundly flawed. He desecrated the land with Israelite blood unjustly and prodigiously shed, rendering it inhospitable to Yahweh, thus, exacerbating his people's alienation from him and depriving the land of rest. He fanned the flames of internecine friction, which then engulfed any semblance of unity in Israel. He died, denied, by his own hand, of descendants, and unlamented, his only memorial an annual festival to mourn the daughter he killed. The symptoms and consequences of the dynamic between Yahweh and his people depicted in 10:6-16 are, thus, echoed dramatically in Jephthah's brief six years "judging Israel." It is a time when the principles enunciated in Jeremiah's declaration are vividly enacted: "I will first recompense those who have defiled my land double for their iniquity and their sin. They have filled my inheritance with the corpse of their abominations and detestable practices" (16:18).

compositions, see Yehuda T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analysis, Exegesis* (ed. John W. Welch; Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 50-117 (51, 57); Douglas, *Leviticus*, 50; eadem, *Wilderness*, 117.

<sup>102</sup> Exum, *Tragedy*, 47-48.

