

Sanctified Aggression

Legacies of Biblical and Post Biblical
Vocabularies of Violence

edited by

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T & T CLARK INTERNATIONAL
A Continuum imprint
LONDON • NEW YORK

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A Continuum imprint

Published by T&T Clark International
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX
15 East 26th Street, Suite 1703, New York, NY 10010

www.tandtclark.com

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset and edited for Continuum by Forthcoming Publications Ltd
www.forthcomingpublications.com

Printed on acid-free paper in Great Britain by Cromwell Press

ISBN 0-567-08070-6 (hardback)
0-567-08060-9 (paperback)

CONTENTS

Series Editor's Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Abbreviations	x
List of Contributors	xi
YVONNE SHERWOOD AND JONNEKE BEKKENKAMP	
Introduction: The Thin Blade of Difference between Real Swords and Words about 'Sharp-Edged Iron Things'—Reflections on How People Use the Word	1
KLAAS SPRONK	
The Daughter of Jephthah: Changing Views on God, Man, and Violence in Plays and Oratorios since George Buchanan	10
YVONNE SHERWOOD	
Textual Carcasses and Isaac's Scar, or What Jewish Interpretation Makes of the Violence that Almost Takes Place on Mt Moriah	22
HUGH S. PYPER	
Fleshing Out the Text	44
MALACHIE MUNYANEZA	
Genocide in the Name of 'Salvation': The Combined Contribution of Biblical Translation/Interpretation and Indigenous Myth to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide	60
ATHALYA BRENNER	
'On the Rivers of Babylon' (Psalm 137), or between Victim and Perpetrator	76
ALASTAIR G. HUNTER	
(De)nominating Amalek: Racist Stereotyping in the Bible and the Justification of Discrimination	92

TOD LINA FELT	
Purity and Danger at the End of the World: Priestly and Prophetic Paradigms in Contemporary Apocalyptic Visions	109
TIMOTHY K. BEAL	
The White Supremacist Bible and the Phineas Priesthood	120
DAVID JASPER	
Jesus the Actor: Edwin Morgan's <i>A.D. A Trilogy of Plays on the Life of Jesus</i> (2000)	132
JEREMY PUNT	
Messianic Victims or Victimized Messiah? Biblical Allusion and Violence in <i>The Matrix</i>	139
ELIZABETH LEIGH GIBSON	
The Making of Modern Martyrs: The Martyrs of Columbine	156
TODD PENNER AND CAROLINE VANDER STICHELE	
The Tyranny of the Martyr: Violence and Victimization in Martyrdom Discourse and the Movies of Lars von Trier	175
JAN WILLEM VAN HENTEN	
Internet Martyrs and Violence: Victims and/or Perpetrators?	193
JONNEKE BEKKENKAMP	
Violence and Final Vocabularies: On Mapping Actual Hopes and Beliefs	213
Bibliography	230
Index of References	241
Index of Authors	245

THE DAUGHTER OF JEPHTHAH:
CHANGING VIEWS ON GOD, MAN, AND VIOLENCE IN PLAYS
AND ORATORIOS SINCE GEORGE BUCHANAN

Klaas Spronk

Introduction

Modern actors and scenes of violence are often found to be mirrored in biblical stories. One may note, for instance, the many parallels between the story of Samson's death taking 3000 Philistines with him as recounted in Judges 16 and the terrorist action on 11 September 2001 with the same number of casualties in the Twin Towers. Should we now call Samson a suicide terrorist *avant la lettre*? In the same book of Judges we come across the story of Jephthah's daughter. We can compare her sorry fate to what happens to Bess in Lars von Trier's 'Breaking the Waves' (see the article by Penner and Vander Stichele). Both women give their life for a man, a father and husband respectively, albeit that Bess does so voluntarily whereas Jephthah's daughter only gives in to the whim of her father. Are these comparisons justified? Do they help us to achieve a better understanding of violence by and against people of our own time? A closer look at both the biblical stories and their modern counterparts shows that ancient biblical characters hardly fit into our modern categories. The survey presented here of the history of reading and interpreting the biblical story of Jephthah and his daughter shows that the works of Buchanan, Vondel, Händel and Barnard teach us much about the authors and their time, but hardly contribute to a better understanding of the biblical text. To put it positively, the biblical story functions as a mirror of the world in which it is being interpreted. The comparison with the modern texts will show changing views, primarily with regard to the role of the daughter. More than in the biblical story she shall be portrayed as not only a victim but also as a woman who takes her fate in her own hands.

Buchanan

George Buchanan (1506–82) was a Scottish scholar who spent many years in France. As was customary in this period of the Renaissance, he had great interest in the Classical Greek literature and translated, as did Erasmus, plays from Euripides and other ancient Greek writers. In his own plays he related biblical themes to the Greek tragedies. He wrote them in Latin, the academic language of the time, as learning material for the school where he was working as a teacher. Afterwards

they became popular and influenced later writers, as will become clear when we come to the work of Händel and Vondel. The play on Jephthah and his vow, *Jephtes sive votum*, was first performed by his pupils in Bordeaux in the year 1543 and was published in 1554.¹

The play starts with a prologue by an angel preparing the hearer for the events to come. They are presented as a lesson: God wants to teach the people of Israel humility by punishing them via the Ammonites and saving them by means of Jephthah, 'an exile from his father's house, despised by his brothers and sprung from a lowborn mother'. In his turn Jephthah should not make the mistake of being too proud of himself: 'so that Jephthah too may not assess himself by the outcome of this battle, and grow proud and arrogant with success, he will at once be overwhelmed with domestic loss, and his arrogant airs will be shattered and retreat'. He is pitied: 'Poor man, what a mountain of ills overhangs you!'; and so is his daughter: 'great will be the interest with which the poor child will discharge and with her throat's blood pay for the premature joy of that success'. So, it is not Jephthah's vow that is called premature, but only his daughter's happiness on his return. Jephthah is not accused. Like his daughter, he is a victim in a tragedy.

In the first scene of his play Buchanan introduces a new character, absent from the biblical story: the wife of Jephthah. She is called Storge, a Greek name meaning 'love' (especially of parents for their children). She suffers an anxious presentiment of her daughter's fate: in a dream she sees a pack of wolves attacking a flock; there are no shepherds; a dog drove off the wolves but tears a wounded lamb from her arms and 'mangle[s] it with merciless teeth'. For anyone familiar with Judges 11, this dream hardly needs explanation: the dog symbolizes Jephthah, who protects his people against the enemy but also causes his daughter's death.

The daughter reproaches her mother for being too worried: 'fear uncontrolled readily lends credence to unpropitious prophecies'. The daughter is named Iphis; in this way Buchanan relates her to Iphigeneia, well-known from Euripides's drama 'Iphigeneia in Aulis' in which the girl is sacrificed by her father Agamemnon, and in this Classical play we find a similar conversation between mother and daughter.

A messenger reports the successes of Jephthah on the battlefield and announces his return when he has dealt with the enemy. Shortly before his homecoming Jephthah appears on stage speaking to God. As with his wife's dream, albeit less obviously, his words are ominous—a listener familiar with the biblical story finds many hints to the coming events. To begin with Jephthah addresses his God, praising him as

ruler of the world, one true God, unique deity of mercy, power and strength, harsh avenger but kindly father, fearsome to your foes, gentle bearer of salvation to your friends, figure of dreadful anger yet willing to be appeased, warm in love yet goaded to wrath.

1. P. Sharrat and P.G. Walsh (eds.), *George Buchanan Tragedies* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983), pp. 21-94.

Indirectly Buchanan formulates here the theological problem of the story: how in the name of this merciful God and kindly father was it possible that a pious man like Jephthah came to his deed. Jephthah himself confesses that the Israelites have sinned by abandoning their God and therefore deserve the penalty of being delivered into the hands of the Ammonites: 'we poured out foolish prayers to dumb rocks, and made empty vows to deaf logs'. His own vow is of a different nature. It is not made to idols and it comes from a faithful man: 'Mindful of the contract with you, be pleased to receive in kindly fashion this vow of your servant. Though insignificant, it stems from a grateful heart and is freshly owed to you.' When formulating the vow Buchanan does not use the words he knew from the Vulgate, the common Latin translation, and in this way he leaves open the possibility that Jephthah was thinking of sacrificing an animal not of a person:

The first thing [*quod primum*; Vulgate: *quicumque primus*] to encounter me on my safe return to my house will be your welcome victim and will steep your altar with its blood, even though no victim can be counted equal to your kindnesses. But you must with good will consider this as the gift of a mindful heart. You both redeem your promises faithfully and rejoice that vows are faithfully paid to you.

These last words add an aspect one misses in the biblical text: there we hear nothing of God's attitude towards the vow made by Jephthah. One can interpret this silence as approval, but this is by no means certain, especially not in this special case resulting in the offering of a human being.

The next scene describes the meeting between father and daughter when Jephthah returns safely from the battlefield.

Iphis:	I am come forth. How glad and happy I am to see the face of my sire back with us! Father whom I must revere second only to God, allow me to enjoy your embrace. Why, father, do you turn your frowning eyes from me?
Jephthah:	Wretched am I.
Iphis:	May God divert this omen on the enemy!
Jephthah:	That is my wish too, but it rebounds on me.
Iphis:	Alas, what is this I hear?
Jephthah:	The most wretched father of a wretched daughter.

Jephthah does not yet reveal the vow he has made, although Iphis urgently tries to find the reason for his sadness. As in the Euripides' play, the father gradually prepares his daughter for things to come. Iphis comes close to the truth when she remarks that with the favourable outcome of the war 'it is right to pray and pay our vows. We should not coax the deity with prayers when the fickle breeze of fortune blows against us, and then abandon ceremonies in thoughtless negligence when we are prosperous.' Jephthah agrees and asks her to attend the sacrifice, without telling her its nature.

Iphis is unhappy with the situation. She keeps asking herself why her father has reacted so strangely. Is she to blame? She makes an interesting observation on the fate of women in general:

What a harsh fate the breed of women experiences when brought forth into the world! Though free of blame, they are bitten by the envious tooth of malevolent gossip. The fictions invented by the anger of the talkative servant, the lies uttered by the suspicious husband himself, or by malicious neighbours, are regarded as fact. I cannot control the suspicions of my sire; the safest remedy, I think, is enjoyment of an unspotted conscience.

She gets help from Symmachus, whose name means 'fellow fighter', as befits his role in the story: he fought next to Jephthah on the battlefield and is a friend of the family. He offers to try to clarify the situation. Jephthah reveals to Symmachus that he is forced to sacrifice Iphis, 'the sole surviving hope of my family'. More important than his fatherly love is his conviction that 'promised vows demand unflinching observance'. He clearly suffers under this heavy burden, but there is no way out, not even in death:

O sun, creator of the light of day, O ancestors, O all you men who have no part in sin, turn your faces from this accursed sacrifice. Or you earth which is to drink in the innocent blood of the maiden, suck me into your open caverns and devour me in your boundless womb. As long as I can die in innocence, bury me anywhere. I do not refuse to enter Tartarus itself, so long as I do not dwell in Tartarus as slayer of my kin. But why do I mention Tartarus? For me Tartarus is my home!

In Classical Greek mythology Tartarus is the place of punishment in the netherworld. The hell Jephthah is facing in his home is the coming confrontation with his wife.

Before he meets his wife he is admonished by an unnamed priest who points to higher values than to keeping one's vow:

How is it open to you to carry through what our sacred mother nature forbids, what our love of kin struggles against, and what God loathes?... Our God is not offered gory victims of the blood of cattle; but hearts defiled by no pollution, a mind refined by ingenuous truth, and a chaste conscience are to be offered to him.

He commands Jephthah to 'cease to anger God in your wish to placate him'. Jephthah is not impressed by the lengthy theological expositions. (The way Buchanan portrays the priest can be regarded as criticism of a theology that adapts God's words to our wishes.) He decides to keep to the harsh but simple truth: 'I prefer foolish and simple truth to impious wisdom gleaming with deceit'. He compares himself to Abraham obeying God's command to offer his only son.

His wife complains that while she has been preparing herself for their daughter's wedding, she now is confronted with 'a criminal sacrifice conducted with barbaric ritual'. The reference to the coming marriage of Iphis is another new element in Buchanan's version of the story. Again, it seems to be inspired by Euripides. In his play *Iphigenia* goes to Aulis on the assumption that she is going there to marry Achilles.

After Jephthah has told Iphis that she has not committed any crime, but that her coming death is due to his 'impious sacred vow', she accepts her fate. In fact, she appears to be the only one who shows understanding for her father:

Whatever the fate which necessity impels, I readily consent to suffer, and I gladly offer my life which I owe to my father and my land. I ask you, mother, for this final favour, and will demand nothing hereafter—do not on my account be angry with my father, nor cause friction.

Jephthah offers to take her place on the altar, but she rejects his proposal: she prefers to keep to the letter of the vow. In the chorus following this scene Iphis is praised as a 'maiden with a spirit truly manly' and comforted with the prospect of immortal fame:

Though the injustice of the fates has deprived you of your more serviceable years, and though the monstrous savagery of Fortune has plucked the blossom of your youthful life, your renown after death will add to your glory that portion of life of which chance has deprived you.

It is remarkable that we do not hear one word of accusation against Jephthah. Both she and her father are presented as powerless victims of fate.

In the final scene a messenger reports to Storge about the last hours of her daughter. It can be compared to another play of Euripides, namely *Hekabe*, in which the woman Hekabe is informed about the death of her daughter Polyxene. We hear nothing of the delay the girl asked for according to the story in the book of Judges: two months in which she and her friends 'bewailed her virginity'. The reason for this probably has to be sought in the Classical (Aristotelian) insistence on unity of time in one and the same play. Moreover, this long period of weeping would not fit the picture Buchanan wanted to give, that Iphis bore her fate with dignity: 'Whilst others wept, she alone was dry-eyed as she stood with features relaxed, constant and untroubled about her fate'. She looks more beautiful than ever and she appears to be even more devout. This girl 'of manly spirit' utters a prayer, 'her voice unbroken by her evil fortunes': 'Eternal Begetter of the universe, Father of men, now finally show mercy and pardon the sin of your race, and receive this victim with gentle heart'. She encourages the trembling priest to do his duty: 'Draw near, and remove this life of mine from the light of day; loose the hindering barrier of my body. Discharge from the vow the people, my father and myself'. The act of the offering is not extensively described, only the reaction of her father: 'he was suffused with tears and he covered his eyes with his garment and condemned both himself and his rash vow'; the reaction of the priest: 'he was overwhelmed with weeping and could scarcely loose the passage of her breath'; and of the crowd: 'for long numb in sorrowful silence'.

The people are said to feel sorry for her mother Storge, but she is also regarded as blessed with such a daughter. She answers that this cannot comfort her: 'This consolation is more painful than the ill itself. . . The braver the spirit with which my daughter bore her death, the sorer the anguish which gnaws my heart.'

In Buchanan's version the story of Jephthah and his daughter bears the hallmarks of a Classical tragedy. People are governed by fate: what seems to be most important is the way they react to things that cannot be changed. Jephthah is torn by the struggle between fatherly love and pious conviction: he shows character by keeping to his vow and resisting the temptation from those around him to see things

in a different way now the consequences have become so bitter. He does not evade his responsibility; although he admits his foolishness and although he more than anyone else regrets the outcome. As a mortal he knows his place: he is not God and cannot shape his own life.

In Judges 11 Jephthah's daughter is praised for being not a passive victim but one who deliberately subordinates herself to a religious system in which God and man are to be held to their word. Buchanan presents her as an example for the spectator of one who is able to distinguish between what is essential and what is of secondary importance in life and death. Life may be violent to her and her death may seem untimely and undeserved yet she does not want to resist fate as the divinely set order of things. More than in the original story in the book of Judges Buchanan describes her death as a self-sacrifice based on her own choice.

Buchanan's play was translated into English, French and German. It greatly influenced the way the biblical story was later recounted, for instance in an oratorio by Händel and a play by Vondel.

Vondel

The famous Dutch dramatist Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679) in 1659 published a play entitled *Jeptha of Offerbelofte* ('Jephthah and His Promise to Sacrifice').² In many respects his approach can be compared to that of Buchanan. Both wrote according to the rules of Classical drama and, as in Buchanan's play, the entire action takes place on one day. At variance from Buchanan, however, and more in line with the biblical text is that this day is placed after the daughter's return from a period of two months of mourning in the mountains. In the meantime Jephthah has settled affairs with the rebellious tribe of Ephraim, an episode which is recounted in the Bible *after* the story of the sacrifice. Like Buchanan, Vondel adds a number of other characters: in addition to Jephthah and his daughter—who, as in Buchanan, is given the name Ifis—we meet the wife of Jephthah (named Filopaie, a Latin translation of Buchanan's Storge, 'she who loves her child'), the head of the royal household, the governor of the city, the royal priest, and a jurist.

Filopaie knows nothing of Jephthah's vow and is ignorant of the reason for Ifis's absence. Jephthah hopes to fulfil his vow before he meets his wife and before the two women themselves have the chance to meet. In this way he seeks to prevent Filopaie resisting his plans. As a consequence he does not give in to his daughter's wish to say goodbye to her mother. Only after Jephthah has left for the sanctuary at Shilo does Filopaie hear of the death of her daughter.

Vondel characterizes Jephthah's vow as an inconsiderate, rash action: Jephthah declares that it was never his intention to bring a human sacrifice, let alone his only child, 'the hope of my life, my crown'. In his desperation Jephthah consults a priest and a jurist who try to stop him, but he is not impressed by their flood of words—he does not find in them the purity and obedience to God which should come from

2. N.C.H. Wijngaards (ed.), *Vondels Jeptha of offerbelofte. Treurspel* (Zutphen: W.J. Thieme, 2nd edn, 1976).

the heart. He does consent, however, to go to the high priest at Shilo for advice, but, in the end, time does not permit him to do so before the sacrifice. Jephthah proves unshakeable in his conviction that a vow made to God has to be fulfilled: there can be no doubt that this is the will of God, as his victory over the Ephraimites has shown, and it seems clear that Jephthah's vow had pleased him. Only after the sacrifice does Jephthah realize that he has made a terrible mistake and reproach himself for not having listened to the jurist and the priest.

Ifis, by contrast, accepts with happiness the fact that she has to give her life for father and fatherland. She does not fear death and compares herself to a bride offering her youth on the altar to God and she goes to the altar wearing a wedding dress not mourning garb. For her father she feels only sorrow and tries to comfort him by saying that her death is a blessing and not a punishment. She makes a comparison with the story of Abraham offering Isaac: like Isaac she is prepared and is not hoping, as Jephthah himself cries out, for an angel to prevent the killing. The choir, reacting to her words, praises her as one surpassing Isaac, as she offers her life without objection. In the prologue Vondel himself calls her an example and his play 'a mirror to youth'.

Vondel ends his play more positively than Buchanan. Jephthah is reconciled with God, does penance and finds forgiveness for his rash vow and is able to cope with the death of his daughter. Whereas Buchanan ends with the bitter words of an inconsolable mother, Vondel puts the final words in the mouth of the priest explaining to Filopaie that there is great comfort for her in Jephthah being reconciled with God and with his people, and in her daughter being praised year after year in a solemn feast on her behalf.

Händel

Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759) wrote an oratorio on Jephthah in 1751.³ It was his last great composition, written in a period of growing problems with his physical health, and it is not unlikely that his personal difficulties left their marks on the way he composed the music to the libretto written by Thomas Morell.

Morell himself was clearly influenced by Buchanan's play. He uses the same names for Jephthah's daughter and wife. In addition to them he introduces Zebul, a half-brother of Jephthah, and Hamor, soldier and lover of Iphis. Morell generally follows the biblical account and abandons the unity of time, unlike Buchanan and Vondel who concentrate the events on one day. In this version of the story, as Hamor departs to serve in the army of Jephthah, Iphis shows him out, promising a fitting reward on his return and hinting at their coming marriage. In a lovely duet they sing of happiness to come:

These labours past, how happy we!
How glorious will they prove!
When gathering fruit from conquest's tree
we deck the feast of love!

3. V. Novello (ed.), *Jephtha: An Oratorio in Vocal Score* (London: Novello).

Jephthah speaks of strange feelings, but eventually he ascribes these to the spirit of God and then he makes his vow:

What mean these doubtful fancies of the brain?
 Visions of joy rise in my raptured soul.
 There play awhile and set in darksome night
 strange ardour fires my breast; my arms seem strong
 with tenfold vigour, and my crested helm
 to reach the skies.—Be humble still, my soul.—
 It is the spirit of God; in whose great name
 I offer up my vow:
 If, Lord, sustained by thy almighty power,
 Ammon I drive, and his insulting bands
 from these our long-uncultivated lands
 and safe return a glorious conqueror,
 what of whoever shall first salute mine eyes
 shall be for ever thine or fall a sacrifice.

In the book of Judges, the gift of God's spirit to Jephthah is reported prior to the story of his vow. In the plays of Buchanan and Vondel this element is not mentioned. Morell's libretto introduces a version of the vow which leaves open a possible interpretation other than human sacrifice. Speaking of 'what of whoever' suggests that Jephthah may be thinking of an animal; promising that this 'shall be for ever thine or fall a sacrifice' indicates that, in any case, he shall have the choice of sparing the life of the victim.

After the ominous words of Jephthah it comes as no surprise that mother Storge has a more negative presentiment than her daughter. When Jephthah returns it becomes clear that Storge is right. In this scene everyone around Jephthah tries to make him change his mind. In a dramatic quartet, beautifully scored by Händel, Zebul, Storge, Hamor and Jephthah discuss the matter:

Zebul:	O spare thy daughter!
Storge:	Spare my child!
Hamor:	My love!
Jephthah:	Recorded stands my vow in heaven above.
Storge:	Recall the impious vow, 'ere it is too late.
Hamor/Zebul:	And think not heaven delights in Moloch's horrid rites.
Jephthah:	I'll hear no more; her doom is fixed as fate.

One may note that here, as with Buchanan, we also encounter the element of fate. At the beginning of the oratorio this idea is stressed: the first words, sung by Zebul describing Israel's situation, are 'It must be so'. There are things human beings cannot change or comprehend, as is articulated by the choir following the quartet: 'How dark, O Lord, are thy decrees'. Apparently Händel had his difficulties in simply putting God on a par with fate. At the end of the oratorio he changed the words of Morell 'what God ordains is right' into 'whatever is, is right'. This phrase, from the famous British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), is given extra emphasis by repetition of a theme in the music.

Iphis obediently accepts fate and prepares for her coming departure. The priests who have to execute the offering appeal to God, whereupon an angel appears declaring that the vow can be fulfilled if Iphis devotes the rest of her life to heaven in virginity:

Rise, Jephthah, and, ye reverend priests, withhold
the slaughterous hand. No vow can disannul
the law of God. Nor such was its intent
when rightful scanned; and yet shall be fulfilled.
Thy daughter, Jephthah, thou must dedicate
to God, in pure and virgin-state for ever;
as not an object meet for sacrifice,
else had she fallen an holocaust to God.
The holy spirit, that dictated thy vow,
bade thus explain it, and approves your faith.

Everyone happily welcomes this 'escape', which brings Jephthah's vow and its outcome into accord with the story of Abraham offering Isaac. It offers a plausible answer to the theological questions left open in the biblical story. Now there is no longer any tension between Jephthah having received the spirit of God and making his vow. In addition, the contradiction between the vow and the prohibition of human sacrifice is resolved.

Listening to the oratorio one gets the impression that Händel was particularly fascinated by the personal tragedy of Jephthah. The music at the end sounds somewhat perfunctory, and out of keeping with the apotheosis in Morell's text. Händel was more inspired by the preceding story of Jephthah wrestling with incontrovertible fate. Next to the aforementioned quartet, the most impressive piece is sung by the choir at the end of the second part of the oratorio. It begins hesitantly on a note of protest, followed by an emotionally turbulent passage as joy turns to sadness, and ends with a clear acceptance of reality:

How dark, O Lord, are thy decrees,
all hid from mortal sight!
All our joys to sorrow turning
and our triumphs into mourning.
As the night succeeds the day.
No certain bliss,
no solid peace.
We mortals know
on earth below,
yet on this maxim still obey:
whatever is, is right.

Barnard

In 1998 Benno Barnard published a new version of Vondel's 'Jeptha', a free adaptation called 'Jephthah or Semitic Loves'.⁴ In the play, which was staged in

4. Benno Barnard, *Jeftha of Semitische liefdes* (Amsterdam: Het Toneel Speelt, 1998).

numerous Dutch theatres, there are many echoes of Vondel's interpretation. Everything happens in the same place and on the same day, namely, at the moment of Iphis's return from her stay in the mountains and of Jephthah's return from the battle against the Ephraimites. Alongside Jephthah and Iphis we encounter Jephthah's wife, Filopaie, a steward called Ruben, who is also Iphis's lover, Jephthah's military adviser called Tariq, and Rabbi Silberblatt. Barnard also uses a similar plot: Jephthah has to sacrifice his daughter because of a rash vow he made to ensure military success. Although he is distraught at the outcome and although many attempts are made to withhold him from fulfilling his vow, he keeps to his word. He also tries to avoid the confrontation with his wife.

Barnard placed the story in a 'mythic present' with all kinds of modern elements featured—a tank and a pistol, and modern words like 'Playboy', 'ecstasy', and references to Freud, Einstein, and Brooklyn. Barnard also 'modernizes' Jephthah's vow: 'The first woman that on my return floats out of the door of Masfa to meet me I shall surely give in marriage to my excellent advisor'. He excuses himself by remarking that he knows for certain that dancers (or women of that kind) would never oppose this proposal. When things turn out differently he says:

I was thinking of a prize of victory, not of a human being; not of Ifis, because no Ifis did cross my mind. But she was the first. And I tried to settle this among gentlemen, because this one scaled with medals could be her father. But no, Tariq wishes to be promoted to my son-in-law.

Unlike the daughter as she is presented in Vondel's play, Ifis does not accept the consequences of her father's promise. She is in love with Ruben and together they look for a way out. Ifis is angry with her father and when, after her return from the mountains, they meet and Jephthah speaks, 'O, child', Ifis cries out: 'I kick you, scratch you, bite you... You, my father and my traitor!'⁵ This scene recalls the meeting as described in Judg. 11.35-36 and underlines the completely different relationship between father and daughter in Barnard's play. But in addition to these reproaches Ifis also shows tender feelings for her father based on sweet memories from her childhood. At the same time she realizes that this period is definitely past. The harsh reality is that her father has ruined her life. He still is the most powerful man in her life—she calls him 'second god'—this man, however, who previously protected her, is now the man who uses his power to force her into an intolerable situation.

All the men in this play are pictured negatively. Tariq may be a hero on the battlefield, but in the dialogues with Ruben and the rabbi he proves to be no match for his opponents. Ruben is verbally strong, but when it comes to deeds he does not have the nerve to see things through to the end. At the moment the arranged marriage seems inescapable Ruben grabs Jephthah's pistol to force him to change his intentions. With such power in his hands he becomes scared and even falls back into childish behaviour.

5. In Dutch the words 'father' and 'traitor' rhyme: 'vader'/'verrader'.

Ruben: Death has the solution!
(Starts sucking at the pistol)

Silberblatt: No solution
 is better than life. Deep inside of Ruben
 there is fear: fear of death and fear of life
 and fear of that pistol and bang...

Ifis (*furious*): Now shoot!
 Ejaculate! That stupid thing
 isn't your mother, is it?

She takes the pistol out of Ruben's hands. He has shown himself to be no different from the other men: 'Now you are like them; now you know the feeling of power'. They are all like her father, alike in their fear of 'our second sex'. Sarcastically she greets all the men around her. 'Goodbye god', she says to each of them, but a moment later her last words are: 'we are all dead'. Then she takes the pistol and kills herself.

In the final scene all the characters are together, including Filopaie. They find no comfort from each other, nor can they give an explanation of what has happened. As a conclusion they say, one after another: 'We are silent and shall sleep no more. We are not close to ourselves [*Wij zijn ons niet nabij*].' This accords with the tragic lines previously expressed by Ruben:

Countless people are looking for themselves
 and find nobody: there is nobody
 for them, nobody that can be them.
 Said someone. Said someone. A human being.

God does not play a role, not even in connection with the vow. This becomes clear in a dialogue between Ruben and Jephthah where Ruben suggests asking the rabbi for advice—perhaps he can help change the situation.

Ruben: That oath of yours has religious roots.
 This orthodoxy asks for a black,
 a Bible-black rabbi...

Jephthah: My oath
 does not need God nor rabbis, because my oath
 is made in front of my most intimate men,
 my general staff, steward—
 my oath cannot be broken.

Rabbi Silberblatt is not asked to solve the problem, he is only invited to make up the marriage contract. The only thing he can do for Ifis is to spend time with her. He appears to be better at telling jokes than in finding convincing theological arguments against Jephthah's plan. Jephthah himself is far from the pious man portrayed by Vondel. At the moment Silberblatt begins a fine theological-philosophical discourse Jephthah rudely interrupts..

Silberblatt: And God?

Jephthah: The god of Masfa has been asleep for centuries.
 His book is finished.

- Silberblatt: You will occupy yourself
with the question why something is and why not?
The god...
- Jephthah: Rabbi, I must!
- Silberblatt: Alright, alright.
(I have tried, but now his spring snaps.)

At the end of Vondel's play the priest speaks words of comfort to the mother of Iphis. Not so with Barnard. Silberblatt starts repeatedly with pious truisms, but they sound unconvincing, even to himself.

I, a Jew,
say to you: through this Red Sea of blood
there also is a passage. No, that doesn't sound right.⁶
But I have to talk, say that your daughter...
(*moved*)...that Ifis has chosen peace
above, O above the dream. For peace
that goes beyond my understanding...

Nobody listens. When he tries again, Jephthah indicates his antipathy: once again he interrupts Silberblatt, this time with a blasphemous wordplay:

- Silberblatt: The god of Abraham and of...
- Jephthah: ...God vomits.⁷

In a way, when it comes to the role of God in the story of Jephthah and his daughter, Barnard remains close to the biblical text. In Judges 11 God is remarkably absent. He is spoken to, but he does not react. It is as if the words of Jephthah fall back upon himself and his family.

As in the plays of Buchanan and Vondel, as well as in the oratorio of Händel/Morell, Jephthah is pictured as a tragic character. He is torn by the dilemma he is confronted with because of his own inconsiderate vow. Barnard portrays his daughter as a passionate, intelligent and wayward young woman, discovering the truth about men in general and her father in particular. She is not a passive, slavishly obedient girl who gladly offers her life for father and fatherland. She does not accept the macho-like behaviour of the men around her and in the end proves to be more courageous and active. She does not let others take her life, she takes it herself. It is by this deed, by her own initiative, that she is the only one in this play who saves his/her honour. In so doing she follows the trajectory already set out by Buchanan, but blurred in the works of Vondel and Händel by an effort to make the biblical story acceptable to the readers/hearers of their time.

6. In Dutch the words for 'blood' and 'right' rhyme: '*bloed*'/'*goed*'.

7. In Dutch the last word ('*braakt*') sounds like the second syllable of the name Abraham.