

Review of Margaret Murray Talbot, *Why Jephthah's Daughter Weeps: A Child-Oriented Interpretation*. Biblical Interpretation Series, 199. Leiden and Boston: Brill 2022; Pages: xiv, 226 pp.; ISBN: 978-90-04-50817-0.

Prof. dr. Klaas Spronk, Retired professor of Old Testament at the Protestant Theological University, Utrecht

This well-written book is based on a PhD completed at the Brite Divinity School (Fort Worth, Texas) in 2020. It was presented in part at the annual SBL conference that year in her paper entitled “Agency and Assemblages: Assessing Bat-Yiphtach’s Bleeding Body,” which gives an indication of the answer to the question in the book’s title. The author presents an entirely new interpretation of Judg. 11:38 as referring not to the virginity of Jephthah’s daughter and her remaining childless, but to her first experience of her menstrual cycle (menarche) and the fact that she has “no agency to control her own bleeding body” (p. 185). This book can also be read as an introduction to child-focused studies in general and child-focused biblical scholarship in particular. This takes up more than half of the book and, in my opinion, adds more to the value of this book than the exegetical speculations.

In the dedication at the beginning of the book (p. v) the author shares her experience of “the grave harm and costs to children (and our later selves) caused by the community’s doctrines, rituals, stories and words that no longer have meaning—or that need new meaning.” The present study is for her “a chance to make new meanings and new community, gathered around the wisdom, humour, and curiosities in these ancient myths.” The ancient story of the nameless daughter of judge Jephthah—Talbot names her Bat-Yiphtach—is taken up first to give her “significance as a child who matters” (p. 1), and then to show that “the theoretical lenses in childhood studies [...] offer critical views for questioning what previous interpretations have not questioned.”

Of primary importance to this approach is that Talbot fills in gaps in the story in which the reader is not informed of, among other things, the age of the girl and the presence of a mother. For her child-focused interpretation she assumes that the girl is “a transitional, menstruating

(post-menarcheal) child” (p. 7). This is very different from, as she remarks, the usual feminist approach which tends to see her as an adult woman and emphasises her role in opposition to male dominance. Talbot does not want to go along in this “adult-centric gender binary.” In the review of previous scholarship in Chapter 2 she demonstrates that in the history of interpretation, most of the attention has been given to religious matters concerning the vow or to attempts at reconstructing the historical background. Talbot concludes that the ambiguity of the story allows for a multiplicity of interpretations and that she is the first to offer the characterisation of the girl as a child in transition and to suggest an interpretation through a child-focused lens. One question that remains after reading the following chapters is whether this really sheds new light on the ancient story. Has it not created a different new story about an in itself relevant topic, instead of recovering something that lay hidden in the old narrative?

Chapter 3 gives a good overview of child-oriented scholarship with very useful information about the state of the art, terminology, and the relation between child studies and biblical studies, both historical and literary. An important element for Talbot is that we as modern readers should question our clear-cut ideas about children and adulthood. “Querying (and queer-ing) the presuppositions underlying and sustaining a child-adult binary is crucial in childhood studies” (p. 66). This is especially true for children like Jephthah’s daughter in a different time and place.

In Chapter 4 Talbot, finally, explains why according to her Jephthah’s daughter can be regarded as a transitional child lamenting her first menstrual cycle. Here too, she finally (p. 103, n. 3) explains what precisely she means with the often-used term “menarche.” A basic argument for her thesis is derived from the ongoing discussion about the meaning of the Hebrew word *betulim*, usually translated as “virginity” in the phrases where the daughter of Jephthah asks permission to go away for two months “to bewail my virginity” (Judg. 11:37) and the subsequent report that indeed “she and her female companions bewailed her virginity” (verse 38). She notes that in the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Vol. 2, p. 289) David Clines has constructed a broad lexical domain *Batul*, which includes “young womanhood” and “virginity” and gives as the general meaning of *betulah* “young woman, esp. as marriageable, sometimes specific virgin.” Nevertheless, the *DCH* maintains the traditional interpretation of *betulim* in Judges 11. Talbot finds more room for her interpretation in the study by Gordon Wenham¹

1 Gordon Wenham, “*Bē’tûlāh* ‘A Girl of Marriageable Age,’” *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972) 326–48.

in which he states that in some texts *betulim* should be taken to refer to the age and marks of adolescence, and not to virginity. Referring to Judg. 11:37-38 Wenham states that

‘Virginity’ or ‘youth’ would be equally appropriate translations here, but the sad tale ends on a note, whose full pathos is only apparent if it is an additional piece of information, “She had never known a man” (v. 39) (p. 341; quoted by Talbot on p. 111, n. 33).

In his opinion it would be pointless to add this information if it was clear that the word *betulim* had no meaning other than “virginity.” It should be noted, however, that Wenham still interprets this text within the framework of virginity and childbearing. Talbot clearly goes in a different direction when she concludes that *betulim* “might indicate actual experience and concern with transitioning female children and how they navigate the outward and inwards effects of change during their pubescence” (p. 112). It is a weak basis for the exegetical exposition that follows.

Before—as she rightly calls it on p. 128—she goes on to “construct” a child-oriented interpretation of Judg. 11:29-40, Talbot gives a very instructive overview of biblical scholarship on menstruation and on adolescence and menarche in childhood studies. With regard to the latter, it is remarkable that she relies primarily on “majority world cultural contexts,” for example on young girls in Nepal and Tanzania, avoiding the danger of “colonial imperialism” in applying “minority world conceptualizations and priorities” (p. 129, n. 97). However politically correct this may be, this does not take away the risk that the gap between life in ancient Israel and life as it is experienced in our own times is bridged too easily.

The new approach to the story of Jephthah’s daughter leads to a number of new interpretations. The first new element is found in the first verse. Talbot translates: “And upon Yiphtach was the *death-dealing* spirit of YHWH” (p. 163). This remarkable addition “death-dealing” is not related to the child-focused approach, but more generally with the fact that Talbot wants to leave “room for multiplicity,” that is, alongside the common more constructive view of the spirit of the Lord in “a less sanguine, more violent sense” (p. 151, n. 188) as is demonstrated in the great smiting of the Ammonites reported in the following verses.

According to Talbot it is better not to take Mitspah as the name of a town, but to retain its original meaning of “watchtower” in 11:29. She combines the two as “watchtower in Mitspah” in 11:34. In this way she leaves open the possibility of a symbolic connection with menstruation as is found in

folktales about nubile maidens locked away in towers, analogous to the custom of secluding menstruating women in many societies.

Talbot relates the phrase “only she alone” in verse 34, which is usually interpreted and translated as “she was his only child,” to the phrase about her dancing and playing the tambourine: she would have come out dancing to meet her father all alone. This seems a rather forced attempt to stay away from the theme of Jephthah losing the prospect of progeny. Instead, Talbot wants to focus on the girl as a child in transition with few relationships, assuming that she is part of a far from perfect household, that also lacks a mother.

Talbot also attempts to relate the repeated reference to “two new moons” in verses 37–39 to menarche and menstruation. It could have been a euphemistic reference by the girl to her father that she had experienced menarche in his absence, or an indication that she first had to undertake a period of menstrual separation before she could return to him to be sacrificed.

An important element in this interpretation from the perspective of the daughter is her lack of agency. This is discussed in Chapter 5 on “Relational Assemblages and Bat-Yiphtach’s Agency.” This is introduced with a useful introduction to the topic in child-related studies. Here she draws on theories of childhood by sociologists Nick Lee, David Oswell, and Michael Gallagher, whose research constructs agency relationally and contextually in open assemblages. She goes against the trend among modern interpreters to emphasise her autonomous stance in relation to her father. Jephthah’s daughter is at the mercy of her body (she bleeds), her father (she echoes his words and obeys), and socio-cultural and religious traditions for menstruating girls (her father tells her “to go” in verse 38).

The book ends in the final chapter with “Conclusions [...] and more questions.” Talbot notes three “opportunities for future research.” The first is the interpretation of the “two months” and the possible relation to ancient mythologies that connect menstrual and lunar cycles. The second is the question of whether the focus on children in transition can be also useful in the interpretation of other narratives in the book of Judges. Thirdly and more generally the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter read in this way, may stimulate “posing questions about the degree to which cultic norms and interpretations of previous (priestly) generations regarding the ‘right’ in the deity’s eyes are indeed still right” (pp. 200–201). It is especially important to question the presuppositions that underlie the common child-adult binary.

After reading this book one may be stimulated to adopt a child-oriented approach in the interpretation of biblical texts. When it comes to the way Talbot applies it to the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter, most readers

will probably be less convinced of the value of its results. Too much depends on the hypothetical suggestion about the physical condition of the daughter. When Talbot considers the scholarship on the girl and laments that it “fails to account for the menstrual bleeding” (p. 146) she suggests that this aspect has remained hidden in the text until now. Instead, it is more to the point that she uses the story to bring up the theme of menarche and the agency of a menstruating young girl. This is in itself an important topic related to questioning the adult-child binary, and is something that is added to this story in order to make it a topic of discussion.

For the interpretation of the book of Judges it is certainly useful to look at it from the perspective of children, but not in the way Talbot suggests. Recurring themes are those of having progeny, and the relationship between parent and child. This can easily be illustrated by the storyline in its literary context, ignored by Talbot. The story of Jephthah and his daughter is preceded by the story of Gideon who declined the offer to start a dynasty with his son as his successor on the throne (Judg. 8:23). Shortly before that we read about his young son Jeter, who does not dare to kill a captive enemy (8:20). Later, Gideon names another son Abimelek, which can be translated as “my father is king.” This contradicts Gideon’s earlier decision about kingship within the family. This son Abimelek turns out to be a disastrous leader. After Abimelek we hear of two judges, the second of whom has no less than thirty sons (10:4). This is in sharp contrast with Jephthah who has only one child. He is followed by three judges, two of whom again stand out because of their numerous offspring. The first has thirty sons and thirty daughters (12:9), the third has forty sons and thirty grandsons (12:14). In the next story progeny is again problematic. It begins with an elaborate narrative about a childless couple who eventually after divine intervention, receive Samson as their son. It can be seen as a counterpart to the story of Jephthah who loses his only child after dubious negotiations with God. It is also interesting to compare the conversation between Jephthah and his daughter with the conversations between Samson and his parents.

The book concludes with an extensive bibliography (very useful, especially for those interested in childhood studies), indices of modern authors (indicating that not all the literature mentioned in the bibliography is actually used), subjects, and scriptural citations.