

March 10, 2024

Women's History Forum

Howard University professor Joyce Camper discusses women of the Bible from a feminist/womanist perspective.

Please read these two essays by biblical scholar and minister, Renita Weems.

Please Read for March 10

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER AND THE MOURNING WOMEN)

Read: Judges 11:1–40

WARNING: This story may be deceptive.

AFTER ONE SOBER reading, we come to realize that the Old Testament story of Jephthah and his daughter should carry this label.

On the surface, the story is about religious integrity: a man spares nothing to honor a vow he has made to the Lord. It is a story about radical obedience: a child submits herself dutifully to her father's will. In a word, it is a story about devotion: a man's devotion to his god and a daughter's devotion to her father. On the surface, devotion is a very noble concept, one worthy of exploring and expounding. Although to some it may sound a bit old-fashioned, it deserves our sincerest reflection.

Politicians and religious leaders are quick to remind us of the importance of loyalty and obedience. But devotion is a different notion. Devotion to one's family, to one's god, or to a vow one has made, goes beyond the sort of blind submission that loyalty and obedience sometimes evoke. Devotion conjures up notions of love, zeal, and a sense of sacred responsibility.

Here, in the story of Jephthah's daughter, where a father proves his devotion to his god by honoring the costly vow he made, and a daughter shows her devotion to her father by acquiescing to his wishes, we find ourselves forced to consider whether devotion, too, has its limits. But in the story of Jephthah and his daughter, somewhere nobility turns into a nightmare, devotion turns into death. Somewhere the quest for honor and duty, in the face of a young woman's senseless death, becomes a gross distortion of justice. Jephthah was a skilled warrior and gallant in battle. But . . . in spite of his bravery and gallantry, he was stigmatized among his people because he was the son of a harlot (11:1). Can't you just imagine the conversation of his townspeople?

"Did you know that Jephthah, the young warrior, is illegitimate?"

"You mean, born out of wedlock?"

"Isn't it a shame? Such a fine young man, too."

"If it weren't for the fact that he's illegitimate, who knows what he could have been."

"Too bad." Because of the circumstance of his birth, a circumstance beyond his control, a shadow was cast over Jephthah's reputation and future. Jephthah grew up in his father's house, but because he was the son of another woman, the son from another union, his half-brothers banished Jephthah from his father's house. In so doing, his brothers cut him off from his share of his father's inheritance.

Ashamed and bitter, Jephthah fled and began to use his otherwise admirable talents in a life of crime. Ambition made Jephthah hungry. When the elders of Gilead enlisted Jephthah's support in a battle against their enemies the Ammonites, Jephthah agreed to help only if they would install him as leader of the Gileadites. Ambition also made Jephthah impulsive and blind. In his desperate effort to atone for the circumstance of his birth, and in his zeal to defeat the Ammonites, Jephthah risked everything he had in order to obtain what he imagined he lacked. He bargained with God. Ambition caused Jephthah to be so consumed with what he thought he lacked, he lost sight of what he did have.

When ambition is an earnest effort to stretch toward excellence, there is nothing wrong with it per se. The problem arises when ambition begins to reach beyond excellence in a grasp for power and prestige. Then, not only can ambition make us impulsive and blind, it can also make us vulnerable. It can seduce us into making promises we cannot keep. It can make us neglect relationships, exploit friendships, and forget vows we made to those dear to us. In our attempt to secure that which our egos crave, we may risk placing ourselves at the mercy of the brutes and those who do not care about us. We may become vulnerable to those who have what we clamor for. And we may become vulnerable to the fear, insecurity, and hunger that drive us to foolish vows—even vows to God.

Eager in his atonement and to prove himself worthy of the Gileadites' trust, Jephthah struck a bargain with the Lord. If the Lord granted him victory over his people's chief rival, the Ammonites, Jephthah promised to make a sacrificial offering to the Lord on his return from battle (11:31). The foolishness of Jephthah's vow hardly deserves comment. Exactly whom did Jephthah expect to come out of the door to meet him upon his return? If not for his daughter, then surely a servant. There is something immediately suspicious about the recklessness of this vow. Following a successful military campaign against the Ammonites, the triumphant warrior returned home, where celebration greeted victory. And, as is the case when soldiers of war—especially heroes—return home, family and friends came out full of cheer and jubilation to welcome him back.

There was nothing unreasonable about Jephthah's daughter dashing out the door of her house that day to greet her father. With timbrels and with dances, the unsuspecting young woman ran to welcome home her victorious father. But joy met sorrow, delight encountered disgust, and, worst of all, acclamation stumbled on accusation. In a perfect example of what is known as blaming the victim, Jephthah lashed out at his only begotten daughter, accusing her of bringing disaster upon him:

“Good grief, my daughter! You have surely brought me grief! You have become a pain to me!” (11:33). Jephthah projected upon his daughter that which rightfully belonged to himself. Because of his thoughtlessness, it was he, Jephthah, who would inflict pain on his daughter. Yet Jephthah talked as though he were the victim when, in fact, it was his unnamed daughter who would become the victim of his foolish vow.

And what did the young daughter feel when she discovered her father's foolish vow? Anger? Rage? Could she have been as compliant and passive as the narrator (presumably male) indicates? If she argued with her father or resisted his attempt to make her his scapegoat, how different might the outcome of his story have been. We have a right to ask these questions. Imagine how the young daughter must have felt! We have a right to use our imaginations. We must imagine the young woman's immediate reaction. Although it was of no interest to the

narrator, her reaction must be of interest to us as women. For, too often we find ourselves the victims of male righteous reasoning.

What do you do when you discover that someone you love has bartered your life away on account of an impulsive vow? The young woman's joy gave way to sobriety. She who had come forth with dance and exultation because of the glory of her father's victory, now stood still, composed and humbled before the gravity of her father's foolish vow. And in one scandalous remark, Jephthah's daughter delivered over to her thoughtless father that which women for centuries have fought to retain—the right to her life:

"Do to me according to what has gone forth" (11:36). No fancy intellectual work on the part of theologians, feminists, translators, and preachers can take back what Jephthah's daughter gave up that afternoon. It is an irredeemable remark. If only the young woman had screamed, kicked, fought, cursed, even fled, anything—absolutely anything—but surrender.

As horrible as her surrender was, as much as it offends our sense of righteous rage, we can take courage that Jephthah's daughter did choose how she would spend her last days. For that, we can be grateful. She chose to spend her final days in the company of her girl friends:

". . . leave me alone for two months so I may go down to the mountains and lament my virginity, I and my girlfriends" (11:37). As a woman in a culture where women were without voice and autonomy, maybe Jephthah's daughter was powerless to avert what was about to happen to her. But she did show remarkable resolve in her decision to design her own memorial.

Jephthah was probably stunned by his daughter's petition and undoubtedly hurt by her preference to be with her girlfriends instead of him. He was forced to surrender his daughter to something he could not understand: women sharing one another's grief.

"Go" was the most he could bring himself to say to his daughter's strange request. And so the story goes. For two months the daughter of Jephthah and her girlfriends sojourned together across unnamed mountains, lamenting the daughter's fate and sharing her despair. There is a sorrow known only to women, a sorrow so profound and so bottomless it can be shared with only a woman, a sorrow that only another woman can help you bear. It comes from the feeling of having been violated, betrayed, and abandoned by a force much stronger than yourself. And when the force is someone you trusted, the sorrow can be unbearable.

Hence, it should come as no surprise that Jephthah's daughter called her girl friends together to lament her life. We can thank her for initiating one of the earliest recorded female professions: mourning women. Mourning became a recognized profession for ancient women (Jeremiah 9:17; Luke 23:28). There was something peculiar in the nature of women, it was believed, that made crying easier for them. As a result, a whole tradition and profession developed whereby women were invited to express in tears and moans what, in a misogynist society, no doubt was too dangerous to express with words.

Mourning women were hired to congregate and lift up appropriate laments in times of death and disaster. They were women who, at a moment's notice, could lift up their voices in a wail and arouse others to respond likewise with sympathy and tears. They were women who could penetrate the heart of even the fool; they could look beyond merriment and see tragedy, beyond tragedy and see death, beyond death and see God. Prophets, rarely. Scribes, hardly. Priests, never. They were women whose lives were circumscribed within a patriarchal society.

But the one profession they were permitted was the one profession they perfected: mourning tragic foolishness. What might their songs of sorrow have expressed? At least one song would have lamented that it is a crying shame that the redemption story is littered with the bodies of innocent women: daughters sacrificed, martyrs burned at the stake, witches drowned, sorceresses decapitated, preachers banished, whose only crime was being women who saw doors and opened them. But it would be inaccurate to suggest that only women were privy to the sorrowfulness of human foolishness. Over the years a few men have distinguished themselves as unashamed to weep over sin. Jeremiah was one. Scattered throughout his prophecy are lamentations and confessions of anguish that have earned him the title of the “weeping prophet” (Jeremiah 9).

Whereas other prophets are remembered for the grandeur of their prophecy, Jeremiah is remembered for his inability to hide his feelings. In our society Jeremiah would be considered a “crybaby.” In the not-too-distant past when we were growing up, one of the most painful and damning things that our peers could have called us was a “crybaby.”

Remember the horrible taunt “Crybaby, cry; wipe your weeping eyes”? Whereas girls were permitted to show their emotions and cry, boys were taught early on to stifle their tears. For to cry was to be out of control, emotional, frail, weak, powerless, vulnerable. In a word, feminine. And that would never do. But thanks to Jeremiah, we have a model of a prophet who was not ashamed to include as part of his memoirs his most painful outbursts before God and his deepest disappointments. And when he became exasperated with the sin before him, when he felt unable to utter another word and plead any further with people, he was man enough to enlist the support of women to take up where he had failed.

On at least one occasion, Jeremiah called for the mourning and wailing women to come and do what he had failed to accomplish (9:17). Perhaps they could bring the people of Judah to their senses. Is it possible that Jeremiah gained his respect for these professional, weeping mourning women as a result of having witnessed his mother make the annual pilgrimage to mourn Jephthah’s daughter, four hundred years after her death? Could Jeremiah’s mother have been a professional mourner? Could Jeremiah, have discovered in those gatherings of lamenting women the power that comes from crying and the strength that comes from being able to cry? Perhaps he had observed that, at times, the tears of his mother and the women around her brought change and repentance where prophecy and sacrifice had failed. Perhaps it was in dedication to the memory of his mother and her weeping girl friends that he composed the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Or, perhaps, Lamentations is an anthology of the laments that Jeremiah’s mother and the other women of Judah raised at the destruction of the holy city in 587 B.C.E.

Whatever influenced Jeremiah, we can be grateful that Jephthah’s daughter, in her one moment of resolve, found a ministry of women for women: the ministry of weeping with God. But more than a young woman’s virginity was lamented out there on those mountains. The daughter of Jephthah and her girlfriends huddled in a circle and wept over more than children unborn and ecstasy inexperienced. Each of her girlfriends knew that what was about to happen to Jephthah’s daughter could happen—without warning—to any one of them. For every woman who lives in a society that values notions more than it does women lives with the risk of annihilation. So, the women cried inconsolable tears for two months. They wept for Jephthah’s daughter. They wept for

themselves. And they wept for their daughters' daughters. They knew that the worst lie of all was that, in the end, this would not be the daughter's story, but the father's.

So, they wept for a name never known and a whole story that would ever drive them back out to those mountains year after year to cry all over again. The story of Jephthah's daughter is deceptive. It is deceptive because it is about something graver than honor, integrity, and obedience—for too often noble ideas are corrupted in the hand of extremists and the insane.

As I write this, I am listening to a news report of a North Jersey teenager who, after a bitter argument ending in failure to convince his senior high school girlfriend not to have an abortion, doused her family's home with gasoline and set it afire. Not only was the girlfriend killed, but also the fetus he did not want aborted, along with a number of other residents of the dwelling. Who taught this deranged young man that the best way to make a woman obey is to kill her? How did the argument for life and love get equated with a match and torture? Unfortunately, there are other stories of horror, such as the one of the estranged husband who shot his wife because he didn't believe in divorce; and the elderly husband in Florida who could no longer stand to watch his beloved wife of more than forty years waste away from Alzheimer's disease, so he shot her in the head—three times. Somewhere, a love story goes awry. There is something immoral here in the quest for morality. Someone really ought to call for the mourning women. It's a crying shame.

Jesus found himself confronted with the same flagrant disregard for the lives of women when brutes dragged before him the woman "caught" in adultery (John 8:3-11). These men, too, were willing to sacrifice a woman for a notion of what is sacred. They reminded Jesus that the Law of Moses commanded that "such" be stoned to death. But before he spoke, Jesus knelt down and wrote something in the dirt with his finger. What he wrote, we are not told. I can hardly forgive the narrator for not taking the time to go over to see what it was.

Those words might have saved at least one more of the thousands of women who have been executed over the centuries as a result of some man's misguided notion of what is right. Just think. It could have saved one more woman. Someone really ought to call for the mourning women. It's a crying shame. We all have friends, myself included, who are the victims of what many have come to refer to as relationship violence, from the not-so-casual slap across the face and shove across the room, to the brutal kick and much worse. Mothers. Sisters. Aunts. Cousins. Girlfriends. Neighbors. Women tied to men—husbands, fathers, sons, lovers—whose only outlet for venting their frustration and anger—rather than cry—is to lash out at the most vulnerable people around, the women who love them. These women—our mothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, girlfriends, and neighbors—live in a vicious cycle with such men. "Why do they stay?" we ask in horror.

The reasons are as complex and varied as the men and women wanting their children to grow up without a father in the home. Some women stay because they feel they have no other economic options. Some stay because they fear living alone, without a permanent man in their life, and a violent man, they reason, is better than no man. Some stay because they cherish the moment of reconciliation, which eventually follows the violence: that fleeting moment of his repentance when he is once again romantic, gentle, childlike, and lovable. Others stay because they are addicted to the violence; it is the only life they know. They all have one thing in common: they do not know that they have the right not to be beaten.

Someone really ought to call for the mourning women. It's a crying shame. It takes a strong woman to leave what she knows—even if it is the love of a violent man—to face what she does not know, to face life alone. My mother did. Recently while on a plane, I was thumbing through a magazine trying to get my mind off my fear of flying. I came across an article about a Philadelphia man who had chained and butchered several women in the basement of his home on Marshall Street. My first impulse was to turn immediately to the next page and read the entertaining article there. I stopped myself. I remembered that I had had this same reaction when I had heard about this incident on a television news report a week earlier. Then, I had shaken my head in horror and gone back to my dinner. This time I studied the picture of the man and his house, and a snapshot of a victim. This time I wept.

I wept, not just for the victims, though they were worth weeping over, I wept as well for my own callousness. And when I had dried my eyes, I wrote this poem. Forgive me, Is that your arm over there? Is that your leg over here? Are those chains around your wrist? Forgive me, I almost didn't notice you. I almost didn't notice that you'd been mutilated. I almost didn't notice that you'd been decapitated. I almost didn't notice that you'd been chained to a post all night long. Forgive me, I almost didn't notice that you were female, black, young, alone, curious, and broke. Like me. Forgive me. But really, dears—before I free your wrist, tell me . . . How could you be so stupid? How could you be seduced by a Cadillac and a roll of cash? Couldn't you recognize a fool and a demon when you saw one? Forgive me. Neither did I.

Why should you? The recognizing of fools and demons is a dying art. Besides, you're not the first to be seduced by fools and demons. Women have been seduced by fools and demons before—and lived to tell it. Your fault is that you were not so lucky. There are other women in the Bible, besides Jephthah's daughter, who were not as lucky as the woman dragged before Jesus, whose only crime was to love the foolish and dangerous men, strewn across the pages of salvation history with their mangled bodies and wasted blood: women such as Tamar, who was seduced and raped by her half-brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-22); the concubine without a name, who was offered to strangers by her husband, a Levite, in order to save his own life and was later butchered by him in a sorry attempt to unite the people of Israel (Judges 19: 1-30); and Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea, who threatened to beat and publicly humiliate her into loving him (Hosea 1:1-2:13).

The real tragedy is that the violence each of these women suffered is, in fact, incidental to the point of the story. Someone really ought to call for the mourning women. It's a crying shame. It has been said before and deserves to be said again: the stories of these women are rarely stories about these women. Their mutilation is often a part of a larger story about someone else—namely, men.

Tamar's story is, in actuality, a footnote to the story of the conflicts among King David's sons as heirs of the kingdom. The concubine's story is incidental to the story of property rights and tribal unity where all the tribes of Israel gathered together to wage battle against the tribe of Benjamin in their commitment to avenge the Levite's loss of his property, namely, his wife. The threats against Gomer are supposed to be overshadowed by the depth of Hosea's love for her as his disloyal wife. The story of Jephthah's slaying his daughter is subsumed under the story of male integrity and religious piety. Somehow, the story of female victim never quite gets told. Yet the sound of these women's screaming voices cannot be silenced. They continue to demand a

hearing in the church: for now, more than ever, the church cannot afford to turn its head in silence before the horror of the violence that women continue to endure. Stories of women victims—stuffed in car trunks, floating naked in ponds, crowding police stations with black eyes, broken ribs, and busted lips—are popular television plots that bore us instead of enraging us. We have, for all practical purposes, become inured to violence. Nor can the church afford to overlook its role in chaining women to bullies, brutes, and beasts in the name of sacred submission and obedience. Yet, before we can issue a credible statement on the problem of violence against women, we, the church, must first be courageous enough to wrestle with the implacable terror in our own backyards.

Violence against women and other forms of violence are symptomatic of a larger epidemic of violence in our culture and world. Murder, terrorism, and war have become regular forms of communication and negotiation. Someone really ought to call for the mourning women. It's a crying shame. We can be thankful, however, that the story of the fate of Jephthah's daughter does not end on the note of her death. It ends with the commitment of her girlfriends to keep her memory alive in the hearts and minds of women.

Her girlfriends memorialize her in a ritual of mourning. No doubt, they sang . . . they held hands. They danced . . . they held hands. They poured libation . . . they held hands. They called out her name . . . they held hands. They prayed . . . they held hands. And then they wept and wept and wept . . . not out of some morbid fascination with the past, but because of their vision of what the future of women's lives must no longer be. Weeping helped to clarify their vision. The death of Jephthah's daughter was ritualized in song, dance, and tears year after year. She was remembered by the women in her community as an admission that she was not the first woman to have been treated unjustly. Nor, unfortunately, would she be the last. Nor were the mourning women the first to cry over injustice. Nor would they be the last.

Questions for Thought

1. How many women do you personally know (including yourself) who have been victims of male violence and brutality (which includes anything from casual slaps to being mugged, from threats to verbal violence, from being beaten to being raped)?

2. If you had a friend you suspect had been beaten, what would you do: pretend not to notice and wait for her to bring the subject up? Inquire about her bruises? Slip a note in her pocket or on her desk with the name and number of the local women's shelter rather than confront her directly?

3. Discuss the following: What is the story of the woman's victimization in the passage? What role does her victimization play within the larger drama? Discuss whether the woman's victimization was "worth" the lesson at issue in the chapter.

4. Take a test: Monitor your TV programming for the next week to see how many programs revolve around the story of violence against women. Even if violence against a woman is not the central plotline, how many programs include this kind of violence to "help" the plot along? Organize your church-affiliated women's organization to write the network. Include as many

members' names—both male and female—in the petition as possible.

Weems, Renita J.. *Just a Sister Away* (pp. 83-84). Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.