JUDGING JEPHTHAH: THE CONTRIBUTION OF SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS TO THE INTERPRETATION OF JUDGES 11:29–40

Klaas Spronk

This contribution explores the issue of the overt or covert bias in the scholarly interpretation of the morally problematic story of Jephthah. Is it possible to avoid the influence of prejudice? In the survey of previous research, the focus will be on the feminist and the historical-critical approaches. In order to let the text speak for itself as much as possible, attention is paid to the structuring elements in the text, such as verbal tenses, morphological relations, references to the participants, lexical relations, and clearly signaled pivots. The combination of these elements produces arguments for describing the main line of the story and the relations between the different participants. In this way it can be demonstrated that Jephthah is introduced only gradually. As soon as he has assumed a prominent place, he becomes dominant as the one speaking and acting. His position changes with the introduction of his daughter. In the final part of the story Jephthah regains some of his previous power of speaking and acting, but at the end this is abruptly taken over by the Gileadites. It is concluded that, apart from the question whether Jephthah was acting morally correctly, the text indicates that in the confrontation with his daughter and with the Ephraimites Jephthah is losing control.

1 Introduction

It is hard to maintain scholarly distance when reading the story of a judge who sacrificed his daughter. Such morally offensive behaviour calls for condemnation and the reader of this part of the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity expects to find this in the text itself. Otherwise one would have to admit ‘in Marcionite horror’ that people like Voltaire are right in using this text as proof that the god of the Old Testament was barbarous.2 The problem is that the narrator of the

story appears neither to condemn the sacrifice explicitly nor to give clear indications of mitigating circumstances. The fact that Jephthah is presented positively in other texts in the Bible, as a saviour sent by God (1 Sam 12:11) and as a faithful hero (Heb 11:32–33), even seems to indicate that he does not deserve criticism for his actions at all. Does this mean that what a modern reader finds to be reprehensible was not interpreted as such by the narrator and his intended audience? The history of interpretation shows that from the beginning in both the Jewish and Christian tradition opinions have been divided. No one dares to judge this story as complete nonsense, but all try to make some sense of this part of the sacred Scriptures. Jephthah is either praised for being steadfast or judged for making a rash vow.

Surveying the centuries of comments also makes clear how much the interpretation is influenced by the context of the commentator. An interesting example of this is given by David Gunn in his presentation of the way the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter was visualized in English family Bibles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He notices that illustrations of the sacrifice itself, which were quite common in the eighteenth century, gradually disappeared in the books of the nineteenth century. Gunn sees a parallel in the change of cultural attitudes towards public executions during the same period. These were no longer regarded as pedagogically suitable for viewers. It makes one realize how much views can change in a relatively short period and how careful we should be, therefore, when projecting our present standards onto the distant past of ancient Israel.

---

4 Cf. Gunn, Judges, pp. 133–169; M. Sjöberg, Wrestling with Textual Violence: The Jephthah Narrative in Antiquity and Modernity (Sheffield, 2006); Houtman and Spronk, Jefta und seine Tochter; W. Groß, Richter (HThK; Freiburg, 2009), pp. 624–632.
With the rise of the historical-critical method of exegesis, during approximately the same period as that described by Gunn, came the suggestion that it is possible to give an objective explanation of the old texts, taking into account their specific place of origin and development. In his impressive recent commentary on the book of Judges this is exactly how Walter Groß presents the way he interprets this text or, to be more precise, how he dismisses the way in which many modern commentators succumb to the temptation of assuming that Jephthah was pictured negatively in the book of Judges:

Auslegungen im fortschreitenden 20. Jh. auf der Basis der Lektüre der jetzigen Abfolge der Episoden ergeben nicht selten ein sehr ungünstigen sich zunehmend verdunkelndes Jiftach-Bild (...) 

Man kann keinen biblischen Autor oder Bearbeiter benennen, der dieses Jiftach-Bild absichtlich erzeugt oder die in dieser Auslegung implizierten Beurteilungsmaßstäbe angelegt hätte. (...) Man kann allerdings auch keinen modernen Leser daran hindern, ihn so zu rezipieren: Es ist eine historisch unangemessene, aber dem Wortlaut nicht widersprechende Weise, aus heutiger Perspektive, mithilfe psychologisierender und moralisierender Kategorien und unter Eintragung von den damaligen Autoren fernliegenden Handlungsalternativen Jiftachs die Leerstellen des Textes zu füllen. Der Text scheint freilich so sein eigenes Wort nicht sagen zu können, sonder zur Projektionsfläche für die Selbstspiegelung des Lesers zu werden.7

Similar criticism is also voiced by other scholars, especially against a synchronistic approach (Groß speaks of ‘eine holistische Lektüre’) based on the assumption that the book of Judges is a coherent text with a clear message. According to Greger Andersson this is a way of taming texts that violates their autonomy.8 In his opinion the divergences between the different synchronic analyses show that they are based on prejudices which pass over the outcome of historical-critical research, namely, that in Judges 10–12 we are dealing with a ‘conglomerate of material that has not been reworked into a coherent literary unit’.9 As a consequence the interpreter should leave more room for polyphony.

7 Groß, Richter, p. 621.
The same reproach, however, is also made from ‘the other side’ against seeing the book of Judges as the result of a complicated process of growth, for instance, when Eli Assis explains why in his study of Judges 6–12 he wants to focus on the structure of the account and the plot development, looking for the ideology behind the text. Against the theory of a Deuteronomistic editor he maintains:

Even if every scholar bases his historic reconstructions on scientific historical examples, one cannot but feel that the presuppositions of each scholar depend on subjective feelings in relation to the credibility of the Biblical historiography in general and the Book of Judges in particular.  

In the next sections I want to explore this issue of the open or hidden bias in the scholarly interpretation of the morally problematic story of Jephthah. Is it possible to avoid the influence of prejudice? Is the historical-critical method a safe way to achieve that? In this discussion I want to bring in the significant contribution of Eep Talstra to the discussion about methods of biblical exegesis: can it help in this situation to start with a thorough syntactic analysis of the text?  

2 OPEN AND HIDDEN BIAS

It is important to distinguish between an open, deliberately chosen bias and a hidden bias of an author who pretends to be objective but is not. The best example of the first is the feminist approach to the biblical text. J. Cheryl Exum makes no secret of the fact that ‘

starting point of feminist criticism of the Bible is not the biblical texts in their own right but the concerns of feminism as a worldview and as a political enterprise. The reader should be aware of the dominant androcentric agenda in the story of Jephthah and resist it, among other things, by putting extra emphasis on the part of the story where the daughter and her friends take time for themselves and find their own ritual. It is a way—not only for female exegetes—to find meaning in or to give a meaning to the story by making the reader aware of the problematic relation between the sexes. In his ethical evaluation of the story Mikael Sjöberg focuses on the issue of power and takes sides with the daughter as the oppressed party. Joseph R. Jeter states that he could only find one way of preaching on the text, namely, by relating it to stories in recent history of innocent young girls—Helga, daughter of Joseph Goebbels, and Marie, daughter of Czar Nicholas II of Russia—who were brutally killed only for being the daughter of their father. Instead of telling our daughters to die, we, inspired by the gospel of resurrection, should say to them: ‘Arise’.

Within feminist exegesis we also find the standpoint that the biblical text itself is critical of the traditional relation between man and woman, father and daughter. Pamela Tamarkin Reis comes with a remarkable analysis which in her opinion shows that Judges 11 is the story of a powerless girl who succeeds in manipulating her father in order to secure for herself ‘a life of comfortable independence’. Tamarkin Reis suggests that this is not something she reads into the text, but that it is the ‘plain, surface meaning’ of the text itself. There is nothing wrong with Jephthah’s vow, because we have to assume that he knew the Torah, which means that he intended to dedicate a slave and redeem him or her. He was surprised by his daughter, who must have known of the vow and used it to choose her own future. By going out to meet her father she forced him to ‘condemn’ her to stay unmarried and without children. This must have been felt by her as

---

14 Miller, Tell it on the Mountain, pp. 86–91.
16 J.R. Jeter, Preaching Judges (St. Louis, 2003), pp. 94–99.
18 Tamarkin Reis, Reading the Lines, p. 128.
a positive outcome, because it secured her independence and enabled her to profit from the wealth of her father.

Apparently unaware of the exegesis of Tamarkin Reis, Roger Ryan offers a similar explanation. He speaks of ‘a daughter’s act of self-sacrifice’.\(^{19}\) According to Ryan, the daughter positively accepts her fate as an act of independence from her father. The problem is not Jephthah’s inconsiderate vow, but the daughter who cannot be stopped from sacrificing herself. In Ryan’s view, the most shocking thing is that the storyteller gives no comment whatsoever.

Going over the detailed exegesis of Tamarkin Reis, it can be noted that she fills in many of the blanks in the story. She assumes that she knows what was on Jephthah’s mind when he made the vow and that his vow was made public in the city of Mizpah. There is reason to doubt whether her attempt to bring Jephthah’s daughter ‘down to earth’ is merely a matter of close reading of the text within the wider context of the Hebrew Bible. In her introduction she describes as the basic problem of the interpretation of the story the fact that she cannot accept that a man like Jephthah, who is described so positively in Judges 10 and in the first part of Judges 11, can suddenly become a fool.\(^{20}\) What put her on the right track, in her opinion, was her own experience with spoiled children. In fact, she describes herself as a spoiled child making life difficult for her loving father.\(^{21}\) This brings her close to the older pre-critical exegesis in its attempt to explain why Jephthah is held in high esteem in other parts of the Bible.

A similar, more or less hidden agenda can be detected in the monograph of David Marcus. He carefully weighs the evidence put forward by what he calls ‘the sacrificialists’ and, on the other side, ‘the non-sacrificialists’, to show that it is not beyond doubt, that Jephthah’s daughter was really sacrificed.\(^{22}\) The basic argument for his conclusion that she was not killed but sentenced to a life of celibacy, is that the text is ambiguous at many points and that this ambiguity is deliberate in order to heighten the suspense of the story. Many interpreters note that it is a characteristic of this story that the storyteller left a number


\(^{20}\) Tamarkin Reis, *Reading the Lines*, p. 107.

\(^{21}\) Tamarkin Reis, *Reading the Lines*, pp. 107–108. It is interesting to note that she dedicated her book to her father.

of narrative gaps. 23 To interpret these as ambiguities, and even as deliberate, is not necessary, and is probably influenced by the wish to find a solution to the problem of a seemingly uncritical reference to child sacrifice. Marcus does not hide his intentions: ‘My conclusion is that while I personally favour a non-sacrificial fate for Jephthah’s daughter, the evidence is so ambiguous that it must be admitted that both conclusions are possible’. 24 For most scholars this fifty-fifty already goes too far, because it seems to be based predominately upon filling in the narrative gaps. When the balance then swings to the non-sacrificial outcome, one can hardly avoid the suspicion that Marcus is lead by wishful reading.

In his final conclusions Marcus makes an interesting observation about the chief focus of the story. The focus is not Jephthah’s (unnamed!) daughter, but Jephthah himself. The fate of the girl may have been blurred to throw the rash vow of her father in sharper relief. 25 The fact that Marcus does not consider this as an argument in favour of the ‘sacrificial’ interpretation again indicates that he is probably focused too much on the fate of the girl.

3 The Bias in the Historical-Critical Approach

Historical-critical exegesis usually presents itself as being objective, not bound to theological presuppositions like the traditional Jewish and Christian exegesis, and furthermore as free from the wish to use the text to further the psychological or social human well-being. In fact, scholars like Andersson and Gros see it as part of their task to free the biblical text from this straitjacket. In some respects, however, the historical-critical approach also has its own one-sidedness and short-sightedness or tunnel vision.

In any case it is clear that the historical-critical theories about the origin of the story have had consequences for the way Jephthah’s vow is judged by modern commentators. The suggested reconstruction of the development of the text into its present canonical form made it possible to give a more rational explanation for the seemingly

24 Marcus, Jephthah and his Vow, p. 50.
25 Marcus, Jephthah and his Vow, p. 54.
strange behaviour of Jephthah. Julius Wellhausen diminishes the role of Jephthah by stating that his story was only told to explain the custom described at the end of the story: ‘Seine ganze Geschichte hat nur ihre Pointe in dem Opfer der Jungfrau und dient zur Erklärung des Festes, welches man alljährlich in Gilead zu Ehren der Tochter Jephthahs feierte.’ Likewise, instead of discussing Jephthah’s motives, an exegete like Hugo Greßmann looks primarily for parallels of this ‘ätiologische Kultsage’ in the ancient Near East and in Greece. It has long been assumed that, as in the Pentateuch, a Jahwistic and an Elohistic source could be traced behind the text of the books of Joshua and Judges as well. This also has had its consequences for the view on the story about Jephthah’s sacrifice. According to many scholars the story stemmed from the Elohistic source, to which also the story in Genesis 22 about Abraham sacrificing Isaac belonged. In his commentary Karl Budde uses this as an argument in favour of the theory that human sacrifice was accepted in an early phase of the religion of Israel: ‘was der rein menschlich dargestellte Held Jephtha thut, muss sich aus dem Gedankenkreise seines Volkes begreifen lassen. Dass es insbesondere in den Gedankenkreis von E neben Gen 22 vortrefflich past, leuchtet ein.’

Within the theory of the book of Judges as part of a Deuteronomistic History, the story of Jephthah was put in another perspective. Martin Noth’s redaction-critical analysis has been influential, showing a consistent theological framework in the books of Deuteronomy through Kings which emphasizes a negative trend in the book of Judges. Compared to the history of Gideon, the stories about Jephthah show an increase in the sins of the people. This fits well into the redactional strategy:


---

This view has become influential also with regard to the judgement concerning Jephthah. His deeds are seen as part of a process of deterioration. Gerhard von Rad points to such a line in the stories about Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, and Saul. After the vocation comes a first proof of their charisma, but then things go wrong: ‘Der, der ein sonderliches Werkzeug des Geschichtswillen Jahwes war, fällt in Sünde, Erniedrigung oder sonst in Katastrophen.’ It is remarkable that he mentions with regard to Jephthah only the ‘Selbstzerfleischung der Bruderstämme’ in Judges 12. Apparently it is self-evident to him that the story of the sacrificing of his daughter should be read against this background as well and is therefore theologically not a problem.

This way of dealing with the story has set a trend. It has become customary to speak of Jephthah as an ‘anti-hero’ and of ‘the pattern of moral decline in the book of Judges’. Here the results of redaction criticism and most synchronic analyses meet. As indicated above, Walter Groß strongly opposes this interpretation as not taking the story in its original context seriously. In his own lengthy expositions he repeatedly differentiates between a canonical and an historical approach. The text itself contains neither a negative nor a positive judgement concerning Jephthah. When read as part of the Old Testament as a whole, the role of YHWH in this story becomes problematic.

Over against the, in his view, unfounded or historically misplaced judgements in many modern studies of Judges 11, Groß bases his own judgement on a detailed reconstruction of the development of the text. Together with many other scholars he assumes that the story of the vow (Judg 11:30–31, 34–40) is an old tradition taken up by a pre-Deuteronomistic redactor (probably in the sixth century BCE) who combined it with the story of Jephthah being appointed as leader (Judg 11:1–11). When it was given its place within the Deuteronomistic history of the judges, some verses were added. First, the reference to the spirit of YHWH coming over Jephthah was placed before he started his liberating actions (11:29a). By relating that Jephthah received the spirit of YHWH, the narrative places him in line with predecessors like

---

33 Groß, *Richter*, p. 597.
Gideon. A later redactor inserted the story about the negotiations with the king of Ammon. This makes Jephthah look like Moses and takes away any doubts about a possible relation between Jephthah having received the spirit and him bringing a human sacrifice: ‘Nach der Ein- fügung von 11,12–28 besteht für den Leser kein Anlaß mehr zur Ver- mutung, JHWH habe den Sieg geschenkt, um seinen Teil des Gelübdes Jiftachs (11,30) zu erfüllen.’ Further textual distance between the giving of the spirit and Jephthah making his vow was created by another addition in Judg 11:29b–d which was placed there as a link to the story of the struggle with Ephraim (12:1–6) which was added to the history of Jephthah.

Thus Groß solves the problem of the reference to the exceptional human sacrifice diachronically: it was something that the Deuteronomistic redactor and also a predecessor adopted from an existing tradition. Apparently they did not feel free to suppress it or condemn it: ‘Wann und warum dieses Motiv sich mit Jeftach verbunden hat, muß auch offen bleiben. Dem Verfasser von 11,30–40* war das Tochteropfer Jiftachs allerdings bereits vorgegeben, denn es bereitet ihm offenkundig Probleme.’ According to Groß the author tried to deal with these problems by leaving YHWH out of the story as much as possible. Jephthah is not explicitly condemned by the author and therefore Groß, too, abstains from passing judgement on his behaviour. In this regard he distinguishes sharply between historical exegesis and reception history.

Groß’s argument, no matter how well thought out it may be, rests on some presuppositions that can be questioned. His choices may not be as objective as he presents them to be. He assumes some kind of development in Israelite thinking concerning human sacrifice. The story of the vow would be no more than a relic of something which was once accepted in a primitive state of Israelite religion. This does not explain, however, why the Deuteronomist redactor gave it a place in his version of the history of Israel. It is also possible, as suggested by Thomas Römer, that the story stems from a later period and was influenced by similar motives in the Hellenistic atmosphere. As an alternative to Genesis 22, it would have been added to the history of

34 Groß, Richter, p. 620.
35 Groß, Richter, p. 623.
Jephthah to emphasize the different outcome of the story and thus present Jephthah as a negative counterpart of Abraham. Groß dismisses this suggestion by stating that it is not likely that one would have invented such a story in this period without any critical Yahwistic comment. The same can be maintained, however, concerning his own way of finding answers to the questions that come up when looking at the coherence, tensions, and irregularities in the text. One could at least also leave the possibility open that we are dealing here with the work of one author using different sources. It is not necessary to assume so many redactions over a long period.

With regard to his reluctance to judge Jephthah, Groß is influenced by the history of interpretation. He is so much aware of the subjective judgements made in pre-critical and synchronic exegesis that he seems to overstate his case that the text gives no hints at all to the reader about how the actions of Jephthah should be judged.

4 The Syntactic Analysis

In his publications on the methods of biblical exegesis, Eep Talstra calls for the right combination of exegesis, linguistics, and theology. He observes that all too often the different fields of research are kept separate. To do justice to the biblical text, the exegete should start with a sound linguistic analysis. This helps to let the text speak for itself and can, therefore, be of importance when trying to avoid bias creeping in from preconceived theological views concerning the text. On the other hand, biblical scholars should also take the text seriously as part of an ancient and ongoing tradition in which it functioned and still can function as a source of religious inspiration. In this combination of approaches analysing and describing a long and ongoing process of text production and interpretation, it is important to have clarity concerning the many steps involved in interpretation and the right order in which these should be taken.

When we compare this to the approach by Groß in his commentary on Judges, we notice that Groß pays much attention both to linguistics

---

37 Groß, Richter, p. 564.
38 See above, note 11.
39 As could be expected from an expert in this field; cf. W. Groß, *Verbform und Funktion: wayyiqtol für die Gegenwart? Ein Beitrag zur Syntax poetischer althebräischer*
and to the history of interpretation, but that these two have a different place. The linguistic analysis is used by Groß primarily in his reconstruction of the historical development of the text. Deviations from the normal pattern are interpreted as pointing to redactional activity, whereas one could also assume that they signal a specific element within a coherent unity. With regard to the reception history, one can doubt whether it is possible or even desirable to draw a sharp boundary, as Groß does, between the exegesis of the text itself and the history of its interpretation. The process of interpretation started already within the period in which the Bible texts were composed.

Two dissertations written on the basis of research supervised by Talstra on parts of the book of Judges have already demonstrated how useful it is to start the exegesis by establishing the hierarchy of the clauses on the basis of a syntactic analysis.40 Possible structuring elements include the change in verbal tense, the reference to the participants, morphological relations, and lexical relations. The combination of these elements produces arguments for signaling pivots, describing the main story line of the text, and denoting the relations between the different participants in the text. I tentatively suggest that when one looks at Judges 10–12 in this objective way, one may come across some hints of a negative judgement by the writer in describing the actions of Jephthah.

To get a good picture of the story of Jephthah and his daughter, the story should be analysed as part of the whole story about this judge in Judg 10:6–12:7. The text begins with the introduction of the Israelites (יהושע בן ו.jdbc). This differs from the preceding verses speaking of Jair judging Israel. The wayyiqtol (ויספו) at the beginning does not in itself designate a new section, but indicates that this story is told as part of the ongoing history of Israel. In the next verses the story unfolds, consistently using the wayyiqtol, as a growing conflict between the Israelites and YHWH develops. There is a regular change of subject: first the Israelites (v. 6), then (the anger of) YHWH (v. 7), the Israelites (v. 10), YHWH speaking (v. 11), the Israelites speaking (v. 15), and act-

---

In v. 7 the Ammonites are introduced and in v. 8 they are the subject of the sentence without being explicitly named. This underlines that this part of the story is in the first place about the beginning and end of a conflict between the Israelites and Yhwh.

In Judg 10:17 a new beginning is marked by the explicit reference to the Ammonites as subject. There is a remarkable sequence of changing subjects in the ongoing line of the story carried by wayyiqtols. After the Ammonites come ‘the Israelites’, then ‘the people’ (העם) in v. 18. They are indicated more precisely in the following words as ‘the leaders in Gilead’ (שלום בְּנֵלָדִי). Then the text zooms in on one of the Gileadites—Jephthah. So we have the order: Israelites—people of Gilead—leaders in Gilead—the Gileadite, Jephthah.

The main line of the story is indicated by the repeated introduction of direct speech (אמר). This begins in Judg 10:18 and is taken up again by the elders of Gilead speaking in 11:7. So Gilead, its leaders, or its elders are the leading characters in this part of the story. Jephthah figures at a secondary level, indicated by the qatal form (יָהָי) in 11:1. After the introduction of Jephthah, the story line is resumed by a repeated reference in vv. 4–5 (twice introduced by ויהי) to the warring peoples, Ammon and Israel, followed by the initiative taken by the elders of Gilead towards Jephthah. It is not clear why the subject changes from ‘leaders’ to ‘elders’.

After the intermezzo the story continues in the same way as the previous part about the Israelites and Yhwh, namely, with a conversation between two parties who are explicitly named in speaking to one another—the elders to Jephthah and vice versa (vv. 6–10). As in 10:16, this section ends with the action following upon the agreement (v. 11). Yhwh is introduced as the third party by the elders in v. 10. This is taken over by Jephthah in the next verse. Because this takes place as part of the negotiations between Jephthah and the elders, it should not be regarded as a separate part of the story.

Things change, however, in the next verse of the ongoing story (with continuous use of the wayyiqtol), when new characters appear—the messengers of Jephthah and the king of Ammon (v. 12). From this point on Jephthah is the leading character in the story. He takes the initiative in the conversation with the king of Ammon. As in the previous two conversations, the two parties are always explicitly named. Jephthah speaks through his messengers, but his main speech is clearly marked as his own words, with a double use of the verb אמר. This part ends in v. 28 with another reference to Jephthah as the one who was speaking.
What follows in v. 29—the spirit of Yhwh coming over Jephthah—can be regarded as an intermezzo. It has the same place within its context as previously 10:7–8 had about Yhwh’s anger being kindled against Israel. In both cases it concerns a certain aspect of Yhwh and in both cases Yhwh works through humans, first the Ammonites and now Jephthah. It is also formulated in a similar way, because in describing the action they take, the participants are not explicitly mentioned as subject (in 10:8 and 11:29ab). This means that in 11:30 the story simply continues with Jephthah as the main character. He acts like he did before: he starts talking ( BANK ), this time to Yhwh. The emphasis is on the verb. In contrast to the earlier parts of the story, Jepththah does not receive a direct answer. He goes on with what he was doing already (note the repeated verb ייעבר in vv. 29, 32). The action of Yhwh in v. 32 and the situation described in v. 33 with Ammon as subject are syntactically speaking no more than remarks to the side.

A pivot in this ongoing line of Jephthah’s action is indicated by the הנה in v. 34, introducing his daughter. She is presented similarly to how Jephthah was introduced in 11:1. Just as in 11:4–5 where the main line of the story is resumed by a double יְהִי, in v. 35 we find the line describing Jephthah’s reaction introduced by יְהִי. He still has the initiative. With the story as it was told until now, it is striking that Jephthah is no longer mentioned explicitly by name. This part of the text is characterized by pronominal references: ‘his house’, ‘his daughter’, ‘to meet him’, ‘to him’, ‘to see her’, ‘his clothes’, ‘my daughter’, ‘to make me bow’, ‘to trouble me’, ‘I’, ‘my mouth’, ‘to him’, ‘my father’, ‘your mouth’, ‘to me’, ‘from your mouth’, ‘to you’, ‘her father’. The conversation is recorded differently as well. In the story of Jephthah we already came across three conversations: between the Israelites and Yhwh, between the elders of Gilead and Jephthah, and between Jephthah and the king of Ammon. Every time we saw the same pattern with repeated ויאמר followed by the explicit reference to the interlocutors. In vv. 35–38 this scheme is abandoned. The subject of the introductory ויאמר is not named. The regular sequence is broken as well when in v. 37 the reference to the daughter speaking ( BANK) is repeated. After v. 36 one would expect a reaction from Jephthah. This can be interpreted as an indication of another digression in the story.

---

41 Groß, Die Satzteilefolge im Verbalsatz, p. 335.
It is supported by the introduction of new characters at the end of v. 37: the friends of the daughter. Just as in 11:4–5 and in 11:35, is used again to return to the main line of the story, describing that Jephthah acted as promised. Again, it is noteworthy that the name of Jephthah is not explicitly mentioned.

The remark introduced at the end of v. 39 by is placed outside of the main line of the story by the reference to the new characters, ‘the daughters of Israel’. In 12:1 another new character is introduced, ‘the man of Ephraim’. That Jephthah remains the main character becomes clear in the description of the following conversation. Like in the first three conversations, the interlocutors are clearly indicated. In 12:2, however, only Jephthah is mentioned by name. This is repeated in v. 4 where Jephthah is mentioned again together with the return of the Gileadites into the story. Here the focus shifts to the Gileadites. They take over the fight against the Ephraimites. First, we read that Jephthah waged war (וָלִרָם) against Ephraim and in the next phrase the fight appears to have been handed over to the Gileadites: ‘and the men of Gilead smote (וָיכו) Ephraim’. The final scene describing how this was done is syntactically set apart by the weqatal וָלִרָם in v. 5.

The last verse of the history of Jephthah (12:7) is only loosely related to the previous stories: it uses a verb (שָׁפֵט) which was not used earlier for describing his actions, a time span of six years is mentioned which has no connections to anything told before, and an enigmatic burial place (בָּשָּׁר הַגִּירָה) is named for which there are no clear indications earlier in Judges 10–12.

5 Some Conclusions

This is not the place to give a full exegesis of the story of Jephthah and his daughter with a discussion of all historical and theological questions that arise from reading the text. What concerns us here is whether the given syntactic analysis, sketchy though it may be, offers a sufficient basis for the exegesis of the text and, specifically, whether it gives an indication of the way in which the actions of Jephthah were judged by the author.

42 I hope to do so in a commentary on the book of Judges in the series Historical Commentary on the Old Testament.
The analysis shows that in some places, especially at the end of Judges 10 and in 12:7, there is incoherence which can hardly be explained as intentional. Here a diachronic approach may be helpful to arrive at the right understanding of the text. In general one gets the impression that we are dealing here with the work of one author. He may have used different sources for his work, but he wrote this story in his own style, with a number of characteristic features. Good examples of this style are the way the four conversations are built up and also the way in which the story is resumed after the inclusion of remarks in an aside, in 11:4–5, 35, 37.

When it comes to the role of Jephthah in this story, it can be noted that he is introduced only gradually. First, there is the conversation and confrontation between Israel and Yhwh. Then the primary role is taken over by the people of Gilead, who finally install Jephthah as their leader. The text zooms in from the people as a whole, via one of the tribes, to a member of that tribe. As soon as Jephthah has assumed the leading role, he becomes dominant as the one speaking and acting. This changes when his daughter is introduced into the story. She has no name, but the name of Jephthah is missing in this part of the text as well. In the speech the girl is dominant. In the final part of the story, Jephthah’s name is heard again and he regains some of his previous power to act and speak, but at the end this is abruptly taken over by the Gileadites. We may conclude that, apart from the question whether Jephthah’s actions were morally correct, the text indicates that in the confrontation with his daughter and with the Ephraimites, Jephthah is losing control.

This goes together with another interesting characteristic of the text, namely, the distribution of the references to Yhwh. In the first part of the text, Yhwh is a leading character in the story as one of the speakers. In the conversation between the leaders of Gilead and Jephthah, Yhwh is only mentioned at the end as a witness to their agreement. In the conversation between Jephthah and the king of Ammon, Yhwh is again referred to as the authority on which Jephthah bases his claims to the land. On the basis of the syntactic analysis, the giving of the spirit of Yhwh belongs to the part of the story about the conflict with Ammon and not to the story of the vow. Here Jephthah starts a conversation with Yhwh by making a vow. Yhwh does not answer directly, although he later does give the victory. In the conversation between Jephthah and his daughter, Yhwh is mentioned by both father and daughter, but at the end of that part of the story references to Yhwh
are missing. This is a basic difference in comparison to the previous three parts of the story where YHWH was in one way or another decisive for the outcome. In the last part of the story, about the conflict with Ephraim, YHWH is even completely absent. The declining role of YHWH appears to be parallel to the noted tendency of Jephthah’s losing control.

With regard to the daughter, it can be remarked on the basis of the syntactic analysis that the way she is introduced in Judg 11:34 closely resembles the way Jephthah was presented in 11:1. The description of their status in life is not part of the main line of the story. In both cases the story is resumed by ויהי (11:4, 35). The correspondences and, in particular, the differences in the ensuing verses are striking. In 11:6–15 Jephthah is fully present as the dominant character. In 11:35–39 Jephthah is falling silent and his name is not mentioned. The daughter remains unnamed as well, but she becomes the dominant speaker.

In conclusion, it can be noted that the syntactic analysis proves to be an important tool in the exegesis of the biblical text. It helps to get a better view of the structure of the text and also of the discrepancies which may require a diachronic approach. Before taking into account the possible associations with other biblical texts, historical facts, and related religious concepts, and before bringing up our questions from a theological, moral, or gender perspective, we should take the time to let the syntactic analysis provide indications as to the main line of the story and as to the possible emphasis made by the author or redactor of the text. We may thank Eep Talstra for constantly stimulating us to pay due attention to this part of exegetical work.43

43 Thanks are due to my assistant Gerard van Zanden for his help in preparing this article.