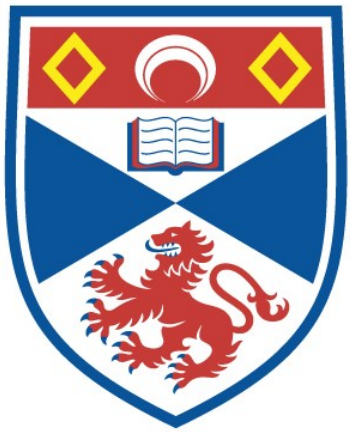
‘SHE IS MORE TO YOU THAN SEVEN SONS’
OATHS, VOWS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Tamara Joy Knudson

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the University of St Andrews.

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To my mother,
who taught me to be strong & kind,
& to my daughter,
who is my light & joy.

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Abstract

Oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible function as poetic conventions: instruments with which the contours of plot are shaped and the subtleties of characterisation are defined. When an oath or vow is spoken, the result is heightened suspense and anticipation—will the promise be kept or broken, and by what means? Whether fulfilled or forgotten, these emphatic statements also shed light on the characters who speak and (in some cases) refute them. Particularly informative are the idiosyncrasies of oaths and vows: the points at which any given promise differs from the expected formulae established for emphatic statements in Hebrew Bible. What follows is an examination of four case studies (the book of Ruth, 1 Sam 24-26, Judg 11, and 1 Sam 1-2), each one a narrative that revolves around an oath or vow. The emphatic statements featured at the centre of these texts diverge from their expected formulae in illuminating ways; in addition, each promise is spoken by or with regard to a prominent female character. The representation of female characters in Hebrew Bible is an oft-debated subject and therefore serves as a prime backdrop for the revelatory capacity of oaths and vows as instruments of poesis in this context.

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Abbreviations

Technical and bibliographical abbreviations used, except where noted otherwise, follow *The SBL Handbook of Style for Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines*. 2nd ed. Project Director Billie Jean Collins, Publishing Director Bob Buller, Executive Director John F. Kutsko. Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014. Translations of biblical texts, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

Introduction

"I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,
I meant to perform to the uttermost
what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfil that purpose,
prove myself with a proud deed
or meet my death here in the mead-hall."
Beowulf, ll. 632-638[1]

1.1: Oaths and Vows in Literature

Beowulf's boast against Grendel, the fear of the Danes, is a pivotal moment in the hero's story. Identified elsewhere as a vow, Beowulf's pledge serves a multiplicity of ends, at once introducing hope, effecting characterisation, and interrupting plot movement.[2] His words instigate suspense and possibility: will the hero succeed in the quest to which he has bound his fate, or will he be brought low? The expectancy conjured by Beowulf's promise remains a driving force of the narrative until he drags Grendel's severed head into the mead-hall, to the horror of "queen and company" (ll. 1644-1650).[3] *Beowulf* 's poet is not alone in the employment of emphatic statements[4] as a story-telling tool: Shakespeare utilises oaths to a similar end in his *Henry VI* plays. Kelly makes the following observation about the poetic effect of oaths in Shakespeare's work:[5]

> In drama as in life, an oath calls for action. In drama, whenever a character swears to do something or not to do something, plot takes form as a direct result of his regard for his word. If the swearer honors his oath, the action takes one course; if he breaks his oath, the action veers in a different direction.

Indeed, oaths and vows prove so influential on a literary level that it comes as no surprise to find them in the work of greats such as Goethe, Schiller, and Chaucer.[6] The art of characterisation, the

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1. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 43.
2. Robert E. Bjork, "Speech as Gift in Beowulf," *Speculum* 69, no. 4 (1994), 1005.
3. *Beowulf*, 113.
4. For the purpose of this study, the term 'emphatic statements' will be used synonymously with 'oaths and vows.'
5. Faye L. Kelly, "Oaths in Shakespeare's Henry VI Plays," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1973), 357.
6. See R. H. Cline, "Four Chaucer Saints," *Modern Language Notes* 60, no. 7 (1945); James C. Davidheiser, "The Role of Oaths in the Drama of the *Sturm Und Drang*," in *Lessing Yearbook* (München: Max Hueber Verlag, 1977), 134, notes the proclivity amongst *Strum und Drang* dramatists for the use of oaths in their work, which he takes to be reflective of the ideals of this literary movement, which "stressed feeling over reason, fostered idealism, and encouraged freedom

facilitation of dramatic tension, the sculpting of plot, and the expression of ardent emotion are each and all achieved by the simple utterance of a promise in the narrative world.[7]

The study of similar poetic strategies in biblical literature has become a vast and peopled area of scholarship. Among others, Sternberg, Alter, Bar-Efrat, and Berlin paved the way to uncover hidden treasure troves in the literature of Hebrew Bible by drawing attention to the nuances and literary techniques employed by biblical writers.[8] This approach highlights not only the aesthetics of biblical literature, but the communicative strategies exercised therein, illuminating an endlessly intricate and well-crafted text with abundant meaning. Amongst the literary strategies identified in biblical narratives, oaths and vows have been recognised as effective tools in the hands of biblical authors. At the forefront of the exploration of emphatic statements and their effects in Hebrew Bible are Ziegler, with her monograph *Promises to Keep* on biblical oaths, and Cartledge, with his formative study of biblical vows.[9] In their respective work, Ziegler and Cartledge have argued compellingly for the dramatic effects of emphatic statements on characterisation and story-shaping in biblical narratives.[10]

These two critics seek to differentiate between oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible, providing the distinct formulae by which they are identified and distinguished. Oaths and vows, as Ziegler and Cartledge point out, are directed towards different addressees: oaths are spoken by one mortal

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from social conventions."

7. Davidheiser, "*Sturm Und Drang*," 134-42.

8. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible,* trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983).

9. Yael Ziegler, *Promises to Keep: The Oath in Biblical Narrative* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008); Tony W. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

10. An important prerequisite to the study of oaths and vows as literary conventions in Hebrew Bible is an exploration of the form and function of emphatic statements in the ancient Near Eastern context from which these texts emerge. Cartledge, *Vows*, 73-133, dedicates a significant portion of his monograph to an analysis of vow-making in this context, examining Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hittite, Ugaritic, and other Semitic traditions. In her analysis of the biblical oath, Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 10-15, builds on an understanding of Hittite and Neo-Assyrian oaths and vassal-treaties. For more on emphatic statements in their early context, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, Paul J. N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law, and Covenant in the Ancient Near East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012); Dennis

character to another, while vows are directed by human characters to God.[11] Vows appear with much less frequency than oaths in the narratives of Hebrew Bible and are in every case fulfilled; oaths abound but are not always acted upon.[12] Despite these clear distinctions, the two kinds of emphatic statements continue to be conflated by scholars as well-versed in the biblical text as Garsiel and Chapman.[13] Even with the valuable contributions of scholars like Ziegler and Cartledge, it is clear that there continues to be scope for the examination and clearer definition of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible. Though the means by which to identify and differentiate between the two types of

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J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963); K. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), 45-53; Manfred R. Lehmann, "Biblical Oaths," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 81 (1969); Herbert Chanan Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1963); J. A. Wilson, "The Oath in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 7, no. 3 (1948); D. J. Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," *Iraq* 20, no. 1 (1958).

11. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 3; Cartledge, *Vows*, 11-18.

12. Only five vows occur in the narratives of Hebrew Bible, and each one is acted upon (Num 21:1-3, Gen 28:10-22, Judg 11:30-40, 1 Sam 1:1-11, 2 Sam 15:1-8), Cartledge, *Vows*, 162-98; in contrast, Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 1, fn. 1, observes that the root שבע (to swear) occurs 216 times in the Bible, while אלה is used of oath-making 40 times. Given the diversity of oath formulae (and the fact that these formulae are at times omitted completely) it is impossible to give more than an estimate of the number of oaths spoken in Hebrew Bible. However, Ziegler provides the following overview: "Oaths using the formula כה יעשה…וכה יוסיף appear twelve times, oaths beginning with the word חלילה appear approximately twenty times, while the oath formula 'חי ה appears approximately forty times in biblical narratives."

13. Moshe Garsiel, *The Book of Samuel: The Story and History of David and His Kingdom*

emphatic statement are relatively simple, they remain largely unrecognised by scholarship today.[14]

Not only is there room to expound on the work of Ziegler and Cartledge, but there is scope to expand their theses as well. Perhaps most importantly—in their worthy aim to typify oaths and vows respectively—these critics overlook the possibility that both kinds of emphatic statements could work to similar literary ends. For all of their distinctiveness, oaths and vows operate as two sides of one literary currency, exercising similar force within a narrative, useful for shaping the contours of plot and revealing a great deal about those by whom they are spoken and received. In terms of Austin's speech-act theory, both oaths and vows are illocutionary in nature: performative utterances that not only describe but also enact a given reality.[15] There is space within current literary analyses of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible—building on the groundwork set by Ziegler and Cartledge—to further analyse their respective forms and appreciate their combined influence on biblical narrative.

1.2: Desideratum

The present study has three aims, each of which has a narrowing effect on the overall scope of the project. The first (and broadest) of these purposes is to explore the ways in which oaths and vows are both efficacious literary conventions employed in Hebrew Bible. As a guiding principle for this analysis, Sternberg's notion that any literary convention (he chooses to focus on quotation as a "microcosm…of artistic strategy") can be utilised to any effect is particularly useful.[16] Applying Sternberg's thesis to an examination of biblical oaths and vows, then, leads to the expectation that emphatic statements might be used to a multiplicity of different poetic ends. For example, an oath or vow might simultaneously characterise a heroine or a fool, instigate or interrupt plot movement, and express devotion or rage. This study will endeavour to reveal the potency and variety of poetic effects achieved by oaths and vows in the narratives of Hebrew Bible.

Literarily speaking, the most informative details of emphatic statements are often their idiosyncrasies. As later sections will elucidate, oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible are identified and defined by given formulae; however, it is often the exceptions to or subversions of these linguistic

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(Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2018), 185, refers to David's oath against Nabal as a vow; Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 190, similarly designates Abigail's oath to David as a vow.

14. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 265-70.

15. J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 234-53; Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 28-30, argues that oaths fulfil all three of Austin's speech-act categories: locutionary (referential), illocutionary, and perlocutionary (having an affect on an audience). The same could be said for vows in Hebrew Bible.

16. Meir Sternberg, “Proteus in Quotation-Land: Mimesis and the Forms of Reported Discourse,” *Poetics Today* 3, no. 2 (1982), 148.

rules that prove the most revelatory in a narrative context.[17] In general, oaths and vows effect plot movement and characterisation; more specifically, the moment(s) at which an emphatic statement deviates from its expected formula is often the most pithy for textual critique. Herein lies the second focus of this analysis: with each of the case studies to follow, the oath or vow in question is examined closely and with special attention to its unique features and their significance for the surrounding narrative. Wherever the oath or vow in question deviates from its expected form, special attention is given to the nature and effect of this departure.

Finally, in delimiting the case studies to be examined here, I have chosen to focus on stories that revolve around a prominent female character(s). The justification for this move is simple: in an exploration of emphatic statements as story-telling conventions, what better place to begin than with stories and—more specifically—characters whose significance is most contested? Critics such as Trible, Bal, and Exum have spoken to the troubled and troubling roles so often designated to female characters in Hebrew Bible. Building on the critical work already established, my aim is to mine the narratives examined here for literary clues as to the depiction of their female character(s), with particular attention to the oath or vow as an impetus for characterisation.

It should be noted that female characters are not alone in speaking oaths and vows that are textually rich and informative in Hebrew Bible. Quite the contrary, the majority of oaths and vows in this context are spoken by male characters and in all cases are revelatory in some way for the story in which they take place.[18] Nevertheless, given that female characters are afforded less speech generally throughout Hebrew Bible and—more specifically—fewer emphatic statements are spoken by or about them, their examples are particularly poignant. Indeed, in each case study considered here the oath or vow does incredible work in shaping the story at large, as well as revealing details about both peripheral characters and (most importantly) the female character at centre stage.

1.3: Project Structure

The following study is comprised of two major sections. The first of these builds on the work of Ziegler and Cartledge and provides a typology of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible. To this end, oaths and vows are considered in light of their comparisons and distinctions, along with their respective formulae and a brief introduction to their literary function. This initial section lays important groundwork for the more specific analyses that follow: in comparing the literary work of oaths and vows, it is first imperative that the two can be told apart and identified by their respective

17. Yael Ziegler, "'So Shall God Do.': Variations of an Oath Formula and Its Literary Meaning," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (2007).
18. See for example Gen 28:20-22, 1 Sam 3:17, 14:24.

forms. In addition, when it comes to recognising the nuances of a given emphatic statement—the omission of or addition to the usual details of a formula—one must first be well-versed in the typical formulae employed. Once the particular forms and general functions of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible have been delineated, the focus of this study will turn to four carefully selected case studies.

To begin with, two narratives that are deeply influenced by an oath(s) are considered: the book of Ruth and the three-part pericope of 1 Sam 24-26. The oath at the outset of Ruth's story, in which she binds herself to Naomi and her people (even unto death), is well-known. Nevertheless, analyses on the significance of Ruth's oath as a catalyst for the story's action and a communicative force for characterisation are sorely lacking. In the case of 1 Sam 24-26, oaths abound, but the most pivotal and definitive is Abigail's oath to David, by which she prevents him from shedding innocent blood. Abigail's oath interrupts this story's plot at a moment of impending doom and reiterates a driving theme of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel: the contrast of just and unjust employments of power.

The final two case studies are each shaped by a vow: one disastrous and one exemplary. Jephthah's vow and the death of his daughter are considered as a climactic and pivotal moment in the narrative of Judges, from which point the treatment of female characters begins a steady decline and culminates in the horrifying details of the book's conclusion. The form of Jephthah's vow is closely examined in light of the common assumption that he speaks rashly and without thinking, an explanation that is troubled by the lengthy apodosis with which his vow concludes. Finally, Hannah's pious vow is considered in light of another literary convention: Alter's annunciation type scene. Alter's impulse to apply the type scene to Hannah's story is not without merit, but his failure to take into consideration the equally weighty effect of her vow impoverishes his reading of her character.

The concluding section reflects back on the discoveries of this study and consolidates the findings uncovered along the way. As we shall see, oaths and vows are used by biblical storytellers to an array of different literary ends; the variety of examples considered here demonstrates this well. The final section of this project synthesises the literary effects revealed by each case study in turn, presenting a composite list of the story-shaping ends achieved by emphatic statements in the four narratives considered here. This summary serves two purposes: to make a case for the profound influence of emphatic statements in the narratives of Hebrew Bible and to invite further explorations into the compelling use of oaths and vows in biblical stories.

A Typology of Oaths & Vows in the Hebrew Bible

2.1: Oaths and Vows: A Comparison

Oaths and vows bear much in common in Hebrew Bible, despite the fact that they are distinct kinds of statements. Critics have argued fervently on this point, perhaps most notably in the case of Cartledge in his monograph on biblical vows. Cartledge sets out in the first pages of his work to distinguish between oaths and vows and takes to task other critics who have failed to recognise the difference.[19] Alter and Fokkelman both come under scrutiny for their conflation of the two in their respective analyses of 1 and 2 Samuel.[20] Picking up where Cartledge leaves off, Ziegler focuses in on the terms אלה and שבועה and the formulaic phrases that typically introduce the biblical oath, relegating נדר to a footnote.[21] In explanation for this move, Ziegler gestures to Cartledge's analysis and agrees that vows and oaths should not be considered equivalent; rather, a vow should be understood as "a conditional promise," while an oath serves as "a person's statement of intention that he or she will or will not do something."[22] Cartledge likewise sees an oath as a promise and one which is undergirded by an implicit curse, while a vow in his view is centred around an appeal to God.[23] Cartledge and Ziegler's works are informative in their close and detailed analysis of vows and oaths respectively and will be utilised further in this study. However, it is interesting to begin a broad overview of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible with an aspect that these critics overlook: the considerable overlap between the characteristics of both forms of asseveration.

In upcoming sections I analyse oaths and vows separately and consider in detail their unique attributes and literary functions. Before delving into this closer examination, however, a brief study of four areas in which oaths and vows are comparable is instructive. To begin with, it is fascinating to consider the inherent leverage that both forms of pledge carry. Throughout the biblical narrative, oaths and vows lend a certain potency to what would otherwise be ordinary statements; it is interesting to note that both forms of commitment convey this persuasive force, despite their technical differences. Secondly, both oaths and vows employ the formulaic term אם or אם לא in many, though not all, cases. Although later sections will enumerate the specific formulae that are unique to oaths and vows, it is beneficial to begin by noting that this particular formula is used interchangeably

19. Cartledge, *Vows*, 11-35.
20. Ibid., 11, n. 1.
21. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 3, n. 31.
22. Ibid.
23. Cartledge, *Vows*, 15-17.

between the two. Additionally, both forms of emphatic statement are almost always precipitated by strong emotion, usually distress. While this may appear as a superficial point, it gains relevance when considered in light of oaths and vows as literary tools that effect characterisation and plot development. Lastly, both oaths and vows are accompanied, on occasion, by actions that serve to solidify their inherent gravitas. Whether by a hand under the thigh of the character obtaining an oath, or a potion swallowed by an allegedly adulterous wife, or a pillar erected by the one making a vow, the fact that both forms of commitment can be enacted in a symbolic way is significant. Each of these ritual actions materialises the spoken oath or vow, emphasising its implication—good or bad—for both the speaker and the reader. While this list of correspondences between oaths and vows is by no means exhaustive, it does broaden critical perspectives (such as Cartledge's) that insist on the two forms of asseveration being viewed in distinction to one another. A biblical reader capable of interpreting oaths and vows in light of their equivalence as well as their discrepancy will possess unique insight into their literary possibility.

2.1.1: Oaths and Vows as Binding Statements

In his study on the linguistics of ancient Indo-European societies, Benveniste is surprised to find that there is no signature expression for the oath that spans across language and culture.[24] "The obscurity of the terms," he points out, "seems to conflict with the importance and the ubiquity of the institution which they denote."[25] Here Benveniste gestures to the fact that the ability to make firm, uncompromisable statements is vital for the functioning of an operative society. The validity of this observation is quickly apparent in many communities worldwide today: whether it be with a marriage vow, the Hippocratic Oath, or the sworn testimony of a judicial witness, most, if not all, societies depend on oaths and vows as institutions that uphold veracity and responsibility. Needless to say, oaths and vows could not play such a central role in the orderly working of society were it not for the fact that they imply a certain severity and potent force, thereby placing individuals or communities under strict obligation to keep their word. Benveniste observes that the oath "guarantees and makes sacred a declaration," and suggests that a "divine curse" is necessarily implicit in a spoken oath.[26] Notably, both oaths and vows employed in Hebrew Bible are freighted with similar obligation, a fact that has kept biblical critics postulating as to the source of their influence. Before examining their hypotheses, it is worthwhile to consider a few textual examples that demonstrate the inherent power of oaths and vows in biblical narrative. In each of these

24. Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 432.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 393, 432.

instances, the oath or vow coerces the speaker by a slightly different means: in the first case, the oath instigates divine punishment; in the latter examples, the emphatic statement holds the speakers irrefutably to their word.

In the case of a woman whose husband accuses her of adultery without proof, the oath plays an important role in legal administration (Num 5:11-31). Required to drink holy water mixed with dust from the tabernacle floor and ink washed off a scroll inscribed with curses, the woman must agree to an oath spoken over her by the priest. This oath determines her fate: if she is innocent, she will walk away unscathed, but if her husband's suspicions are well-founded, she will face the destructive consequences bound up in her oath (Num 5:27):[27]

> And when he has made her drink the water, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, then the water that brings the curse will enter into her and cause bitterness, and her womb will swell, and her thigh will fall, and the woman will be a curse among her people.
>
> והשׁקה את המים והיתה אם נטמאה ותמעל מעל באישׁה ובאו בה המים המאררים למרים וצבתה בטנה ונפלה ירכה והיתה האשׁה לאלה בקרב עמה׃

This rather extreme example demonstrates the power vested in oaths in Hebrew Bible.[28] For the community of Israel, oaths serve as an institution by which to promote and preserve order. Rather than allowing a jealous husband to wreak havoc based on a suspicion, or an adulterous wife to escape punishment, the oath is employed to reveal the facts and instigate punishment.[29] This particular oath is undergirded by a ritual act, which calls for divine intervention and adds an experiential element for the woman over whom it is spoken. For her, the oath becomes quite literally an embodied reality, the potency of which leaves her reproductive capabilities hanging in the balance.

Ziegler draws attention to another example of the binding nature of an oath, noting that, even when an oath is made mistakenly, it holds responsible parties to their word.[30] Amidst their successful conquest of the land of Canaan, Joshua and the Israelite community are approached by the

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27. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

28. While the threat inherent in this oath is certainly ominous, it is also obscure. A later section, "The Enactment of Oaths and Vows," deals in more detail with the consequences implied by the phrases "her womb shall swell," and "her thigh shall fall away." For now, it is helpful to note that Milgrom takes these to imply infertility for the woman, while Levine suggests that a miscarriage is intimated. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 41, 348-349; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 198.

29. The inherent consequences for the woman accused are detailed in the oath; as to the punishment inflicted on her husband, should he be found to have falsely accused his wife, the text is silent.

30. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 3-4, n. 33.

Gibeonites in deceptive guise (Josh 9). Dressed in tattered clothes and carrying stale bread, the Gibeonites convince the Israelites that they have travelled from a distant land to make peace. Thus Israel swears to protect the Gibeonite people, unaware that, in fact, they live a short three-day journey away. Yet when Israel discovers their mistake, they refrain from attacking the Gibeonite cities on account of their oath. Ziegler views Israel's unflinching commitment to their word as "testimony to the power of the oath," particularly in light of the fact that the community was lead to swear on faulty terms.[31] Again, the oath here obviously carries a particular potency given the fact that Israel's failure to claim the cities of Gibeon detracts from their overall acquisition of a territorial inheritance.[32]

Likewise, vows in Hebrew Bible prove a formidable force against those who make them. Perhaps the most notable example here is the harrowing story of Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11). Appointed by Israel as their military leader in a battle against Ammon, Jephthah vows to sacrifice what- (or whom-) ever is first to meet him on his return, should God grant him victory. This particular passage has had critics running for cover for centuries. Did the judge spout this vow in a moment of rash desperation, only to be horrified by his daughter's approach after his successful campaign? Or was he aware of this potential outcome all along;[33] could he in fact have intended it?[34] This latter interpretation is somewhat problematised by Jephthah's passionate outcry upon his daughter's arrival on the scene (Judg 11:35):

> And when he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Ah, my daughter! You have brought me low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to Yhwh and I cannot take back my vow."
>
> ויהי כראותו אותה ויקרע את בגדיו ויאמר אהה בתי הכרע הכרעתני ואת היית בעכרי ואנכי פציתי פי אל יהוה ולא אוכל לשוב׃

Perhaps one could argue that this outburst is insincere, but there is little textual evidence to support this reading. Whatever his intentions in making the vow, Jephthah is clearly distraught at its outcome. Nevertheless, as summarised by his lament above, Jephthah clearly views his vow as

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31. Ibid., 4, n. 33.

32. Not all oaths in Hebrew Bible are fulfilled. In fact, a significant number of examples can be found (and are dealt with in the upcoming section on the oath formula כה יעשה) in which oaths are blatantly ignored or overridden. As we shall see, critics debate whether or not the text contains consequences for these unmet promises. Clearly, oaths (like vows) carry a significant weight and authority in Hebrew Bible, resulting in an interesting literary subversion when they remain incomplete.

33. Cartledge, *Vows*, 179-81.

34. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 16.

inviolable and proceeds to sacrifice his daughter to Yhwh.[35] Once again, the text of Hebrew Bible offers a poignant example of the potency of oaths and vows as yet another character is driven to fulfil his or her commitment despite dire consequences.

The source of obligation tied up in oaths and vows is hard to pin down. Later sections deal more specifically with the elements of oaths and vows and how they function, but it is interesting to note here that both forms of asseveration derive influence from the fact that they include—explicitly or implicitly—a petition to a deity or king. Cartledge describes vows as "conditional promises to God;" in fact, he emphasises the fact that vows in Hebrew Bible can only be made to God.[36] Oaths appear to have a wider range of usage, but they too rely on a supplication to a higher authority. Thus Ziegler notes, "The reverential and even fearful attitude toward oaths may be related to the oath's appeal to a powerful agency (magical, divine or human) to execute a sanction against a violator of the terms of the oath."[37] Although the question of how oaths and vows exercise control over those who speak them is perhaps not fully explained by this aspect, the fact that the speaker is beholden to God, or at least to an earthly sovereign, sheds light on the binding effect of both forms of commitment. Not only this, but the elusive source of potency behind oaths and vows lends itself to their literary usage. The lack of a template by which these emphatic statements gain their force allows biblical authors to manipulate oaths and vows in order to achieve poetic ends. While it is possible that the earliest readers of these narratives were aware of the logic by which these asseverations operate, the subsequent ambiguity surrounding the root of their binding nature certainly adds to their poetic potential for later readers.

2.1.2: The Formulaic Use of אם *and* אם לא

Many critics have noted that אם and אם לא serve a formulaic function in identifying either oaths or vows, but none seem to acknowledge that this characteristic is key to both forms of expression. Gesenius provides a helpful summary of the usage of אם and אם לא in regard to oaths, noting that these terms imply "the suppression of an imprecation on oneself," a crucial aspect of the oath itself.[38] Likewise, Waltke dedicates a significant portion of his analysis of oaths to the workings

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35. Levenson notes that some interpretations of this narrative provide a happier ending: Jephthah's daughter is in fact released from the vow's demand and lives instead as a celibate priestess. Along with Levenson, I find this reading to be incongruent with the narrative as a whole, which takes a downward spiral immediately following the vow's fulfillment, cueing the reader to view the judge's sacrifice as a tragic climax. Ibid., 14.

36. Cartledge, *Vows*, 12.

37. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 4.

38. Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 149.b.

of אם and אם לא, particularly how these words operate in conjunction with other key terms, such as כי, הי, and הלילה.[39] Both Ziegler and Cartledge discuss the importance of אם and אם לא in their respective monographs on oaths and vows, and it seems significant here to compare their findings and highlight this second way in which oaths and vows are similar.[40]

It would appear that אם and אם לא serve as the fragmentary remains of a once fully expressed conditional curse appended to an oath.[41] The Encylopaedia Judaica refers back to an example already discussed in an effort to demonstrate how an oath in its complete form might appear.[42] The oath spoken by a priest over the woman suspected of adultery contains an unabbreviated curse (Num 5:19-22, emphasis mine):

> 'If no man has lain with you…be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse. But if you have turned aside…*then Yhwh make you a curse and an oath in the midst of your people, when Yhwh makes your thigh fall and your womb swell*'…And the woman will say, 'Amen, Amen.'
>
> אם לא שכב איש אתך ואם לא שטית טמאה תחת אישך הנקי ממי המרים המאררים האלה: ואת כי שטית תחת אישך וכי נטמאת ויתן איש בך את שכבתו מבלעדי אישך: והשביע הכהן את האשה בשבעת האלה ואמר הכהן לאשה יתן יהוה אותך לאלה ולשבעה בתוך עמך בתת יהוה את ירכך נפלת ואת בטנך צבה: ובאו המים המאררים האלה במעיך לצבות בטן ולנפל ירך ואמרה האשה אמן אמן:

The 'If…then' structure of this oath is integral to most oaths and vows, although the contingent curse is rarely expressed in full, as it is here. Ziegler notes the possibility that ancient scribes were loathe to write out the curse, lest it take effect in their own lives.[43] Regardless of the cause, oaths and vows are generally identified by an abbreviated form which retains the 'if' but loses the 'then' and the malediction it imposes. This form is shrouded in English translation because אם is usually expressed as a negation and אם לא as a positive assertion.[44] Thus Yhwh's oath to Eli is more helpfully conveyed in Hebrew (1 Sam 3:14): ולכן נשבעתי לבית עלי אם–יתכפר עון בית–עלי בזבח ובמנחה עד עולם. Here it would seem that the necessary self-imprecation upon which the oath hangs is imbedded in the otherwise-ambiguous אם.[45] The reader is left guessing as to what the consequence might be,

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39. Bruce K. Waltke, and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 40.2.2.

40. Cartledge, *Vows*, 15-17; Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 9.

41. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 149.b; Moshe Greenberg, et al, "Oath," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum, and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 358.

42. Greenberg, "Oath," 358.

43. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 9, n. 65.

44. Cartledge, *Vows*, 16; Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 149.b.

45. Gesenius notes that the self imprecation, whether expressed or implicit, is hard to understand when spoken from the mouth of God. However, the form of this emphatic statement and others spoken by God adheres to the structure of an oath which is identified by the presence of אם. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 149.b.

should God fail to fulfil his oath to punish Eli's family. Still, the unspecified result looms behind the אם and adds emphasis to God's pronunciation of Eli's fate.

Vows rely on a similarly conditional structure and employ the 'if…then' formula. Cartledge has made the interesting point that, although oaths and vows overlap somewhat in this respect, the "direction" of each type of asseveration is different.[46] Thus he states, "While an oath begins with *human* action (or inaction) and moves from there to God's potential response, a vow begins with a plea for *divine* action, followed by a conditional promise of the worshiper's response."[47] This statement obviously precludes cases in which God himself is the oath-maker, but appears true for all other cases. However, while the orientation of an oath or vow (i.e. whether it is based on human or divine action) is certainly important, it is interesting to note that both forms are encapsulated in the same basic formula: 'if this…then that.' Thus Cartledge goes on to provide the following two characteristics by which a vow is detectable:[48]

1. The protasis—'If you…' (or 'If God…'): '*im* followed by one or more imperfect or perfect verbs, all attached by *w*-.
2. The apodosis—'Then I will…': a perfect consecutive verb, sometimes followed by imperfects.

The form described here bears much in common with the conditional arrangement of oaths discussed above. Indeed, the telltale אם is readily apparent in every example of a spoken vow in Hebrew Bible, just as it appears in most oaths. Thus Absalom's statement, "For your servant vowed a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, '*If* Yhwh will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, *then* I will offer worship to Yhwh'" (2 Sam 15:8, emphasis mine). Cartledge's assessment proves true here—the vow is differentiated from an oath by the fact that it is dependent on God's action, as opposed to human—and yet the similarities exemplified are equally significant. Oaths and vows are, in many cases, similar in their most defining trait: the אם formula by which we identify them.

2.1.3: Oaths and Vows as Expressions of Distress

The fact that both oaths and vows are frequently spoken by a character in distress may seem intuitive, and yet it serves as yet one more example of the fact that both forms of emphatic statement are similar despite their distinction. Ziegler provides a fascinating analysis of Eli's imprecatory oath against a young Samuel (1 Sam. 3:17), along with other oaths that employ the prevalent formula, כה יעשה…וכה יוסיף. Here Ziegler astutely observes, "a common denominator of all of these oaths appears

46. Cartledge, *Vows*, 16.
47. Ibid. Emphasis original.
48. Ibid., 17.

to be the intense emotions that precipitate the eruption of the self-imprecation."[49] Ziegler's analysis of Eli's outburst against Samuel highlights the turmoil felt by the elderly priest by drawing attention to his unusual use of the כה יעשה…וכה יוסיף formula. In this particular narrative, the formula contains one subtle change; instead of the usual self-imprecation, Eli positions the conditional curse over Samuel's head (1 Sam 3:17):

> And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you."
>
> ויאמר מה הדבר אשׁר דבר אליך אל נא תכחד ממני כה יעשׂה לך אלהים וכה יוסיף אם תכחד ממני דבר מכל הדבר אשׁר דבר אליך׃

In her reading of this narrative, Ziegler interprets Eli's repurposed version of the oath formula (כה יעשה–לך instead of כה יעשה לי) as indicatory of a transference of authority from the priest to his protégée, which continues to unfold throughout the rest of the chapter.[50] Needless to say, this example demonstrates the operative role emotion might take in the act of swearing an oath. Eli here demands a report of God's inevitable judgement on his sinful sons from the mouth of a young boy who will serve as his replacement. Even without Ziegler's insightful analysis of the literary clues here, the reader would be hard-pressed to miss the distress that compels Eli to make this particular oath.

A mere two chapters earlier than this narrative, a similarly pertinent example of the role of emotion in the making of vows is clearly apparent. Cartledge points to despair as a motivating factor behind most vows made in Hebrew Bible, and Hannah's cry to God to heal her barrenness is no exception to this rule (1 Sam 1:1-18).[51] Prior to her vow, the narrative describes Hannah's condition as "deeply distressed" (1 Sam 1:10); in fact, the woman's emotive outcry to God causes Eli to suspect her of drunken insolence.[52] The passion behind Hannah's vow is equally demonstrated by the ends to which she is willing to go to obtain a child. On the condition that God allows her to conceive a son, Hannah vows to dedicate him back to Yhwh for the entirety of his life (1 Sam. 1:11). Indeed, Eli and Hannah's statements agree with most other examples of oaths and vows in their emanation from deep, and often unhappy, emotion.

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49. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 60.

50. Ibid., 62-65.

51. Cartledge, *Vows*, 12.

52. Garsiel argues that Hannah (as mother of God's future prophet) functions here as a foil for Eli (the father of failed priests). Thus, while Hannah (and the reader) understand her situation, Eli is obviously ignorant of the details and comes off unfavorably in the narrative as a result. Moshe Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Ramat-Gan: Revivim Publishing House, 1985), 37.

2.1.4: The Enactment of Oaths and Vows

Critics have speculated as to gestures that might have accompanied spoken oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible. In her dealings with the formula כה יעשה…וכה יוסיף, Ziegler has noted that the phrase—on its own—is meaningless.[53] While she acknowledges that some scholars have suggested that this idiom was accompanied by a symbolic action (e.g. "an index finger moving across the throat"), Ziegler finds this hypothesis doubtful; in any case, such a postulate cannot be validated.[54] Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that both oaths and vows are at times accompanied by a physical action that seems to add ritual substance to the character's spoken word. Although the exact forms of enactment depicted in relation to oaths are different from those associated with vows, it seems significant that both types of statement can be emphasised by a physical expression.

Two examples in Hebrew Bible identify the act of placing a hand under the thigh of the character who exacts an oath. When Abraham requires his servant to swear that he will find a wife for Isaac from amongst Abraham's kin, the patriarch instructs him to perform this particular enactment of the oath (Gen 24:2). Later, Jacob requires his son Joseph to perform the same symbolic gesture in order to substantiate his commitment to carry his father's body to the land of Canaan after the patriarch's death (Gen 47:29). Critics debate as to the significance of the hand under the thigh, some associating it with the rite of circumcision and others concluding that the veneration of a man's reproductive capabilities lends potency to the act of placing one's hand near the genitals.[55] In both of these readings, the word used for thigh (ירך) is translated in terms of its idiomatic sense, as genitalia.[56] Rashi favours the former interpretation regarding circumcision, stating that the individual making an oath must take hold of a sacred object. In his commentary on Gen 24:2, Rashi says of Abraham, "…and circumcision was the first commandment given directly to him and [the fulfilment of that commandment] came to him through pain, and it was precious to him, so he took it as the object by which to administer the oath."[57] Based on this reading, the act of placing the hand under the thigh (or genitalia) of the patriarch adds potency to the spoken oath by drawing on the sacrosanct ritual of circumcision. Not only this, but the act of circumcision itself serves as a primary reminder

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53. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 56.
54. Ibid., 57.
55. See Katz and Ziegler for a helpful summary of these interpretations. Ben Zion Katz, "The Function of the Root *Y-R-KH* in Genesis," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37 (2009), 189; Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 43, note 89.
56. See, for example, Exod 1:5: ויהי כל נפש יצאי ירך יעקב שבעים נפש ויוסף היה במצרים, where יצאי ירך יעקב is taken to mean Jacob's seed, or descendants.
57. Rabbi Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2001), 248.

of the patriarchs' covenant with God, a weighty thought for the one taking responsibility of the oath. In fact, in both narratives it is the upkeep of this covenant that is in question: Isaac must have a wife from his own kin in order to prevent pollution of the chosen race, and Jacob's descendants (along with his bones) must return to the land of promise. No wonder it is the patriarchs themselves who require the oath-takers to perform this particular act, reminding them of the stakes involved.

Equally interesting is the interpretation that a hand under the patriarchs' genitalia might refer instead to his seed, or offspring. Rather than focusing on the issue of covenant, Malul points out that both of these examples deal with the future of the patriarchs' posterity, indicating that this latter reading might be more accurate.[58] Malul's further suggestion that this act therefore invokes "the ancestral spirits of the family to witness and assure the fulfilment of the promise,"[59] seems doubtful given that Abraham calls instead on God as witness. Still, the frequent use of ירך in connection with fatherhood lends credence to the idea that Abraham's servant and Joseph are both reminded of the implications of their ability to carry out the oath for the generations to come.[60] Thus the patriarchs insist on this accompanying action to the oath in order to ensure that the swearer receives a tangible reminder of his responsibility to their progeny.

An example already considered, that of the woman accused of adultery, provides another pertinent text for the consideration of oaths accompanied by ritual. As mentioned above, a priest administers "bitter waters" for the woman to drink while speaking an oath over her, sentencing her womb to swell and her thigh to "fall away," should she be guilty of infidelity (Num 5:27). Interestingly, the rather ambiguous reference to the woman's thigh here has been considered in connection with the narratives mentioned above, concerning a hand under the genitals.[61] Whether or not the phrase refers idiomatically to the woman's genitals, it seems clear that the curse implicates her ability to reproduce. Questioning what might cause a husband to accuse his wife of adultery, Levine suggests pregnancy, stating that the enigmatic curse here might well indicate miscarriage, or, indeed, abortion.[62] A milder prognosis is posited by Milgrom, who takes the obscure curse to mean that the woman, if guilty, will become infertile.[63] In either case, the woman quite literally absorbs into her body (through the medium of bitter waters) the effects of the spoken oath. No doubt this

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58. Meir Malul, “More on *Pahad Yishaq* (Genesis XXXI 42, 53) and the Oath By the Thigh,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985), 197.
59. Ibid., 198.
60. See Gen 46:26; Exod 1:5; Judg 8:30.
61. Eve Levavi Feinstein, “The ‘Bitter Waters’ of Numbers 5:11-31,” *Vetus Testamentum* 62 (2012), 300, note 3.
62. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, 198, 202-204.
63. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 41, 348-349.

action emphasises for the accused the physical implications of guilt, should she choose to accept the priest's incantation.

The occurrence of vows in Hebrew Bible is limited in comparison to that of oaths, but the text does provide one example of a similarly material enactment of a vow. On his way to Haran, Jacob encounters God in a dream. In response, the patriarch erects a stone as a pillar and anoints it with oil, establishing it as a reminder of his vow (Gen 28:20-22, emphasis mine):

> If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then Yhwh shall be my God, *and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house*; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.
>
> אם יהיה אלהים עמדי ושמרני בדרך הזה אשר אנכי הולך ונתן לי לחם לאכל ובגד ללבש: ושבתי בשלום אל בית אבי והיה יהוה לי לאלהים: והאבן הזאת אשר שמתי מצבה יהיה בית אלהים וכל אשר תתן לי עשר אעשרנו לך:

Interestingly, the pillar here serves not only as a physical enactment of Jacob's vow, but also plays a role in its fulfilment. Thus, the stone will serve as a memorial of the vow, and, should God deliver on his end of the bargain, as the site of the deity's house. In the Midrash, this enactment of Jacob's oath is afforded extra detail and gravity:[64]

> What did the Holy One, blessed be he, do? He placed (thereon) His right foot, and sank the stone to the bottom of the depths, and He made it the keystone of the earth…therefore it is called the *foundation* stone, for there is the navel of the earth, and therefrom all the earth evolved, and upon it the sanctuary of God stands…

As with the ritual actions that accompany oaths, this physical performance of Jacob's vow adds emphasis to his statement. Not only this, but it provides a material marker for the patriarch to return to (as he later does in Gen 35:6) in order to revisit his vow.

2.1.5: Conclusion

As demonstrated by these correlating features, oaths and vows are similar in many respects. Whether considered in the abstract sense of the authority they wield, or on the more technical level of one formula they both employ, oaths and vows bear much in common. Indeed, the emotions that lead characters in Hebrew Bible to make either type of promise are often unhappy, and both oaths and vows are emphasised on occasion by a physical ritual. The following sections explore the unique attributes of oaths and vows respectively, but it is important to reiterate before moving on to this analysis that both forms of emphatic statement do in fact resemble one another. While it is vital that the two are not carelessly conflated, it is also significant to consider how oaths and vows might work

64. Rabbi Eleazer, *Pirke De Rabbi Eleazer: The Chapters of Rabbi Eleazer the Great,* trans. Gerald Friedlander (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), 266. Emphasis original.

in concert in a literary context.

2.2: Distinctions Between Oaths and Vows: Function and Formulae

The following sections explore the variations in function and form between oaths and vows. To begin with, vows are frequently classified as religious in nature, due to the fact that they generally take place in the context of supplication and incorporate a conditional promise to the deity. In contrast to this, oaths in Hebrew Bible operate in both religious and legal capacities: while God's covenant oath to the Israelite people is religious in part (facilitating relationship between the deity and a nation), it also bears similarities to ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties.[65] Not only this, but oaths in Hebrew Bible function both as expressions of allegiance to God, and as a means to establish pacts and peace treaties between individuals or nations. Thus, while the biblical vow appears exclusively in sacred terms, the oath is used as both a reverential and legal expression. Despite the fluid movement of oaths between these two categories, the implicit (sometimes explicit) curse and conditional promise serve as another means by which to identify oaths from vows. Every oath includes an imprecation upon its violator, while vows incorporate a conditional promise that is dependent on divine intervention. In fact, this latter distinction is perhaps the second most reliable in distinguishing between oaths and vows.

The primary means by which to identify oaths from vows is by the formulae they employ. In Hebrew Bible, oaths and vows employ different syntactical arrangements in order to distinguish them from one another and from other, less potent, forms of emphatic statement. I have chosen to focus on three primary formulae used for oaths in Hebrew Bible: חי יהוה, וכה יוסיף…כה יעשה, and חלילה. Although vows in Hebrew Bible employ only one formulaic arrangement, each vow adapts this structure slightly for its own context. The upcoming section on the formulae of oaths and vows delineates each formula and explores its use in a number of examples.

2.2.1: Mundane and Sacral Use of Oaths and Vows

Linguistically speaking, oaths and vows are frequently categorised separately, as legal and religious institutions respectively.[66] A more helpful distinction between oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible is between the *mundane* and the *sacral*.[67] To differentiate between religious and non-religious

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65. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 13-15.

66. This is perfectly demonstrated by Benveniste's discussion on oaths, which falls under the broader category of "Legal" terms, followed by his analysis of vows in a later section, which falls under "Religion." Benveniste, *Language and Society*.

67. The term *mundane* is used here to refer to the fact that oaths primarily enable an exchange between two or more human characters, while vows are *sacral* in that they promote a direct

formalities in a biblical or ancient Near Eastern context would be to create a false dichotomy: legal and religious practices are inevitably intertwined and, as all facets of life (in this context), are tethered to divine involvement. Nevertheless, the distinction between mundane and sacral statements is helpful in exemplifying the fact that oaths (though they include an implicit invocation of a deity) primarily facilitate relationships between mortal characters; vows, in contrast, facilitate communication between a mortal character and a deity. Thus the categories of mundane and sacral statements are a helpful starting point in contrasting oaths and vows and their roles in Hebrew Bible.

While biblical oaths can be made between individuals, communities, and even between God and a nation (Ruth 1:16-17; Josh 9:1-15; Gen 21:22-32; Gen 15:1-21), vows only take place between individuals and God in Hebrew Bible.[68] The context in which they occur is typically one of distress, with a character entreating God for relief and vowing to dedicate a person or possession to the deity in return for his help.[69] In fact, Cartledge has argued that vows in Hebrew Bible are always conditional on God's responsive action.[70] Thus the designation of vows as primarily sacral in nature is consistent with their biblical portrayal, in which they function as a means for mortal characters to obtain divine aid.

This remains true despite the fact that Hebrew Bible does on occasion discourage the practice of making vows. According to the biblical text, God will punish anyone who fails to follow through on their vow; as such, it is arguably safer to refrain from making vows in the first place (Deut 23:22). The book of Proverbs, for example, provides this caution (Prov 20:25):

It is a snare for one to say rashly, 'It is holy,' and to reflect only after making vows.

מוקש אדם ילע קדש ואחר נדרים לבקר׃

The primary concern here is with the careless vow, which is made in haste and without thought for the consequences. Not only is the vow depicted as a sacral act, then, but as one that carries with it the weighty responsibility of a promise made to God.

The Hebrew Bible has an elevated regard for those who decide to make vows despite these high stakes, however. The psalmist views God as the rightful recipient of vows, and the legal codes contain instruction on how to make and fulfil vows appropriately (Ps 65:2; Lev 7:16; Lev 22:21; Num 15:8). In fact, vows are seen to be a sure sign of repentance and conversion on the part of Gentiles: after throwing Jonah overboard, the foreign sailors repent and make vows to God (Jon

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exchange between human and deity.

68. Cartledge, *Vows*, 12.

69. Moshe Benovitz, *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 9.

70. Cartledge, *Vows*, 17.

1:16). Similarly, the book of Isaiah predicts Egypt's change of heart and looks forward to the day when the Egyptians will make vows to God and fulfil them (Isa 19:21). Thus the vow in Hebrew Bible serves as a means for people to express their devotion to God and marks the sincerity of their belief.

Interestingly, critics have used the latter passage to demonstrate that oaths, too, can function as an expression of homage to God.[71] Just a few verses prior to Isaiah's depiction of Egyptians offering vows to God, the prophet describes them making oaths regarding their fidelity to the God of Israel (Isa 19:18):

> In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to Yhwh of hosts.
>
> ביום ההוא יהיו חמש ערים בארץ מצרים מדברות שׂפת כנען ונשׁבעות ליהוה צבאות

Here the oath seems to function as a sacral institute in much the same way as the vow. In fact, the most common oath of Hebrew Bible is God's covenant promise to Israel.[72] While this fact certainly blurs the lines between sacral and mundane definitions and makes it hard to classify the oath exclusively in either category, Ziegler makes an interesting comparison between God's oath to Israel and ancient Near Eastern vassal-treaties.[73] The resemblance between God's oath to the people of Israel and vassal-treaties between ancient Near Eastern people and their deities highlights the fact that this biblical oath is arguably fulfilling a mundane as well as sacral role.[74]

Certainly, the biblical oath operates as a political and social convention throughout the biblical text. Much like the Hittite and Neo-Assyrian oath, the oath in Hebrew Bible is used to illuminate the facts in judicial cases lacking evidence (Num 5; 1 Kgs 8:31-33), to create a pact between two individuals (1 Sam 20:17), and to establish peace treaties between warring nations (Josh 9).[75] To some degree, then, the oath in Hebrew Bible does function as a mundane institute, although the clear-cut distinction between mundane and sacral categories may need to be reevaluated in order to present a more accurate picture of the biblical oath. While the oath is used to maintain social and political order, it also facilitates Israel's relationship with God, and incorporates an implicit (occasionally explicit) curse.

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71. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 1. For and in-depth study of God's covenant oath with Israel, see Suzanne Boorer, *The Promise of the Land as Oath: A Key to the Formation of the Pentateuch* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992).
72. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 3.
73. Ibid., 13-15.
74. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).
75. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 12-15.

2.2.2: Conditional Curse vs. Conditional Promise

The concepts of oath and curse are clearly linked in many ancient linguistic traditions,[76] so it is unsurprising to find them equally intertwined in the biblical text.[77] Summarising the position of most scholars on the subject, Ziegler describes the oath as a "conditional self-curse, designed by the speaker to detonate upon himself if he fails to meet the terms of the oath."[78] Ziegler goes on to provide a number of examples in which oaths and curses function in tandem, highlighting the prevalence of this connection in Hebrew Bible.[79] For instance, the use of וישבע and ארור in conjunction is particularly telling in Joshua's statement regarding the city of Jericho (Josh 6:26):

> Joshua spoke an oath at that time, saying, "Cursed before Yhwh be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho."
>
> וישׁבע יהושׁע בעת ההיא לאמר ארור האישׁ לפני יהוה אשׁר יקום ובנה את העיר הזאת את יריחו

Likewise, when an Israelite soldier recounts Saul's foolish oath to his son Jonathan, the concepts of swearing and cursing appear as two sides of one coin (1 Sam 14:28a):

> Then one of the people said, "Your father pronounced an oath on the people, saying, 'Cursed be the man who eats food this day.'"
>
> ויען אישׁ מהעם ויאמר השׁבע השׁביע אביך את העם לאמר ארור האישׁ אשׁר יאכל לחם היום ויעף העם

Examples indicating the pairing of these two ideas abound, suggesting that an oath is strengthened by its combination with a conditional curse.[80] In his comparison of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible, Benovitz provides the following summary:[81]

> The biblical *vow* in effect transfers the ownership of the devoted property from the votary to the Temple. Non-fulfillment engenders liability for trespass against Temple property. The consequences of violation of an *oath*, by contrast, are built into the oath itself: an oath is a curse invoked upon the swearer in the event that the oath is violated. In the biblical oath formula, the curse is usually not explicit. Instead, some form of the divine name is usually invoked, by which the swearer indicates that God will exact punishment in case of violation.

As we have already seen in examples listed above, the implicit (or explicit) curse is not always

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76. Benveniste, *Language and Society*, 437.

77. Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible*, 25-39.

78. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 33.

79. Ibid., 34-37. It is important to note that Ziegler does not take oaths and curses to be synonymous. In fact, she argues against critics who take this view, suggesting that there is little linguistic proof to substantiate the claim. Rather, Ziegler makes the convincing assertion that oaths and curses work in conjunction with one another in many biblical texts, and argues that the curse provides the impetus behind most (if not all) oaths.

80. Ibid. Ziegler goes on to cite Judges 21:18, Nehemiah 5:12-13, Numbers 5:11-31, Isaiah 65:15, and Habakuk 3:9 as other pertinent examples.

81. Benovitz, *Kol Nidre*, 10-11 Emphasis original.

imprecated upon the swearer, as Benovitz claims here. In some cases, as with both Joshua and Saul's statements, the curse is imposed externally on anyone who violates the oath (e.g., by rebuilding Jericho or eating food on a given day). Nevertheless, Benovitz's distinction between the vow as an expression that makes a conditional promise of a person or possession to the Temple, and the oath as a declaration carrying an implicit curse, is helpful in illuminating a key difference between both forms of asseveration.

While the oath is fortified by an implicit curse, the vow is instead reinforced by a conditional pledge of devotion. In fact, it is possible that the Hebrew word used for vow, נדר, is reflected in the word נזר, meaning "to dedicate."[82] Regardless, the biblical vow follows a predictable pattern: a character is motivated by distress to ask for divine intervention and, should God respond, promises an act of devotion. Thus Hannah's promise to dedicate her son to the Temple is conditional on God's willingness to provide her with a child in the first place (1 Sam 1:11); Jephthah's vow to sacrifice the first being to receive him after battle is dependent on God's decision to grant him victory (Judg 11:30-40). The list of vows in biblical narrative is short and conforms entirely to this prescription: Jacob's vow to give a tithe of his possessions to God, should God provide for him (Gen 28:20-22), Israel's vow to devote Canaanite cities to destruction (conditional on their victory, Num 21:2), and Absalom's vow to worship upon being returned safely to Jerusalem (2 Sam 15:8).

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of vows in Hebrew Bible; votive offerings are frequently mentioned throughout poetic and prophetic texts as well as in the legal codes of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Cartledge points out that vows expressed poetically (such as those in the Psalms) often seem to be missing the conditional clause, but posits that the subsequent guarantee of praise should be seen to fulfil this role (e.g. Ps 22:21-22; 35; 79:12-13; 109:29-30).[83] Likewise, critics have argued that the Nazarite vow, described in Num 6:1-21, provides an example of an unconditional vow. In response to this reading, Cartledge points out that the Nazarite vow takes two forms in Hebrew Bible: that of the Nazarite who is selected by God before birth and presumably retains this status until death (e.g. Judg 13; 1 Sam 1:11; Amos 2:11-12); and the individual who chooses to take on the Nazarite vow for a limited time (Num 6:1-21).[84] In the latter case, Cartledge argues, the motivation is likely conditional, as with any other biblical or ancient Near Eastern vow.

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82. Jacob Gadala, “Analysis of Vows in the Book of Judges,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 15 (2011), 61.

83. Cartledge, *Vows*, 17.

84. Ibid., 18-23. Cartledge states that according to both Josephus and the Mishnah, Nazarite vows were frequently made in response to adverse circumstances and were conditional on God's provision.

2.3: The Biblical Oath and Its Formulae

In addition to the frequent use of אם and אם לא in the construction of a conditional oath or vow, various key formulae are helpful in identifying oaths in Hebrew Bible. Each of the three phrases dealt with here are used repeatedly in connection with oaths and are helpful in determining when and how oaths are used throughout the biblical text. Not only this, but each formula generally follows a predictable pattern, thereby drawing the reader's attention when it deviates from the norm and often signaling an important juncture in character or plot development.[85] With each of the following formulae, I will delineate its habitual usage and then analyze one or more example of its application in biblical narrative.

2.3.1: כה יעשה...וכה יוסיף

This particular phrase occurs twelve times in Hebrew Bible and appears in the narratives of Samuel, Kings, and Ruth.[86] Two of these occurrences follow the verb שבע, causing scholars to classify this formula as one expressing an oath.[87] More oblique is the formula's ambiguous meaning—the phrase lacks a direct object and leaves translators guessing as to whether it conveys a positive or negative sense.[88] In response to this uncertainty, critics have debated as to whether this oath requires an accompanying gesture in order to specify the otherwise vague curse or blessing bound up in the word כה. Saunders draws attention to Mesopotamian texts in which the word used to indicate an oath can be translated "to touch the throat."[89] This he finds to be a confirmation of the fact that oaths carry with them an implied threat, suggesting that this is likely the case for the phrase כה יעשה. However, Saunders is quick to recognize that there is little in the biblical text to indicate an association between this formula and the act of touching one's throat, leading him to surmise that this practice may have fallen out of practice over time, leaving the oath with a decreased sense of consequence. Indeed, nearly half of the oaths made with the formula כה יעשה remain unfulfilled in the biblical narrative, perhaps due to the fact that this expression carries with it a less ominous sense.

Before considering the possible significance behind these unmet oaths, it is helpful to begin by examining two cases in which the formula functions as the reader might expect, motivating its

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85. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 53-147 analyzes all three of these formulae and provides insightful readings of their usage in Hebrew Bible. Her analysis of the workings of each formula and the literary significance of its occasional departure from the norm has been instrumental for this study.
86. Paul Saunders, "So May God Do to Me!," *Biblica* 1, no. 91 (2004), 92-94; Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 55, n. 2.
87. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 55.
88. Ibid., 56.
89. Saunders, "So May God Do to Me!", 93.

speaker to follow through on his or her word. Ruth uses this oath to express her unwavering commitment to Naomi, her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:17):

> May Yhwh do thus to me and more if even death parts me from you!
>
> כה יעשׂה יהוה לי וכה יסיף כי המות יפריד ביני ובינך

Likewise, Jonathan swears his loyalty to David with this oath. In the face of Saul's animosity towards David, Jonathan makes an oath to ascertain his father's intentions and reveal them to David (1 Sam 20:13a):

> May Yhwh do thus to Jonathan and more also if it pleases my father to do you harm and I do not reveal it to you and send you away, that you may go in safety.
>
> כה יעשׂה יהוה ליהונתן וכה יסיף כי ייטב אל אבי את הרעה עליך וגליתי את אזנך ושׁלחתיך והלכת לשׁלום

These two examples highlight the use of כה יעשה in an emphatic expression of allegiance between two characters. Indeed, Ziegler points to these two instances as the only ones in which God's name is included with the formulaic phrase, suggesting that this addition may symbolize the unlikely bonds being made.[90] Ruth swears to turn her back on her own people and follow her widowed mother-in-law home, while Jonathan promises to support David, despite the fact that they are rivals for the same throne. Though it does not always incorporate Yhwh's name, this oath is used as an expression of devotion elsewhere as well. In a fit of anger against Ish-bosheth, Abner swears his new allegiance to David (2 Sam 3:9); a few verses later, when Abner is ruthlessly killed by David's right-hand man, David binds himself with this oath and refuses to eat for the remainder of the day (2 Sam 3:35). Clearly, this particular oath formula is capable of expressing depths of relational commitment that might otherwise be challenging to articulate.

Far from bearing only positive connotations, however, this oath is also used in cases of vehement anger and violence. Perhaps most notably, two rulers in the book of Kings make oaths to kill the prophets Elijah and Elisha. When Elijah slaughters her prophets, Jezebel swears to kill the prophet by the end of the next day (1 Kgs 19:2). Later, the king of Israel uses the same formula to emphasize his determination to kill Elisha before evening (2 Kgs 6:31). If nothing else, it seems clear that the formula כה יעשה serves as a means for characters to express acute emotion, whether in an attempt to communicate devotion or hatred. This apparent prerequisite could offer one explanation for why so few of the oaths made with this formula are ultimately fulfilled.

Words spoken in the heat of a moment might well prove unreliable in retrospect, particularly in the case of an oath made as a passionate outburst. Ziegler suggests emotion as one potential reason for the fallibility of these particular oaths, although she goes on to explore other literary possibilities at play. "The violation of the oath," Ziegler notes, "appears to constitute an integral part of the story

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90. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 78-79.

in which it appears."[91] A fitting example is David's oath against Nabal, who brashly refuses to supply David and his men with provisions. Although David's troops have protected Nabal and refrained from pillaging his goods, the aptly-named fool derides David's messengers who come requesting aid. In response, David rallies his men and embarks with the intention of teaching Nabal a lesson. On the way, David utters the following oath in anger (1 Sam 25:22):

> God do so to the enemies of David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him.
>
> כה יעשׂה אלהים לאיבי דוד וכה יסיף אם אשׁאיר מכל אשׁר לו עד הבקר משׁתין בקיר׃

The Masoretic text renders the oath in puzzling terms, implicating David's enemies rather than David himself, should the oath not be carried out (לאיבי דוד in place of לדוד).[92] This version differs from Septuagint, which follows the oath's more standard form and places David as the recipient of a conditional curse, should he fail to follow through on his threat.[93] Regardless of how the oath is rendered, David's intentions toward Nabal are clear: he instructs his men to gird up their swords and swears to kill every male in Nabal's household. The fact that David, the righteous foil to Saul, is poised to slaughter his fellow Israelites creates considerable tension in the plot and pinpoints this moment as a decisive one for the future monarch. Abigail's timely arrival on the scene and her persuasive speech arguably preserve David's role as a commendable character in the narrative, preventing him from following in Saul's footsteps and killing his own people. The narrator does not ultimately seem concerned about David's unfulfilled oath; rather, the characters involved (and therefore the reader as well) walk away from the scene with a sense of relief, despite the fact that David does not follow through on his word. This example suggests that the oath might be used as a literary device that moves the reader to the edge of her seat, adding a tone of severity to an already heated moment, but that is quickly forgotten by narrator and reader when the plot tension is resolved. In light of this particular case, the literary role of an oath proves more important than its conventions: whether or not the oath is carried to its completion, it provides the author with a unique tool with which to effect characterisation and plot development.

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91. Ibid., 59.
92. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 149.b.
93. Ibid.; Saunders, "So May God Do to Me!", 95.

2.3.2: **חי יהוה**

Despite the fact that the formula חי יהוה occurs more than any other oath formula in Hebrew Bible, critics continue to debate as to the meaning of this enigmatic phrase.[94] Lehmann reads this formula as one that summons a blessing upon the speaker, thereby creating motivation for its fulfillment.[95] Thus the phrase might be rendered, "May I/you be blessed with long life if I/you comply with this oath."[96] However, Lehmann notes that blessings are ultimately less likely to inspire compliance than curses, which is why he believes that the imprecatory expression אם or אמ לא was later incorporated into the formula. Juxtaposed with this view is Greenberg's interpretation of the phrase, which perceives the formula as one that calls on a deity or king to serve as witness to the oath.[97] With this reading, the name of an authoritative figure is invoked in order to strike fear into the heart of those beholden to fulfill the oath.[98]

While she concedes that this formula is likely to remain shrouded with some ambiguity, Ziegler makes a few key observations as to its literary function. To begin with, she finds this oath to be "inextricably tied" to the divine name, from which it gains its potency.[99] Beyond this, Ziegler notes that this formula conveys less of an emotive response than the previously discussed כה יעשה formula.[100] In addition, this phrase is used on a number of occasions to communicate deference to its addressee, lending particular significance to the few instances in which the oath's respectful tone is absent.

While the formulaic phrase כה יעשה tends to signal strong emotion on the part of the speaker, oaths prefaced with the phrase חי יהוה occur from the mouths of characters whose demeanors are comparatively unruffled.[101] Although already discussed above, David's oath against Nabal, along with his ensuing interactions with Abigail, serves as a pertinent example for this claim (1 Sam 25).

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94. Ziegler notes that a similar oath formula was prevalent in ancient Near Eastern texts: "Akkadian texts regularly invoke the life of the god(s), using the phrase *nīš ilim* or *nīš šarrim tamū/zakāru*. Ancient Egyptian oaths nearly always involve an oath sworn by the life of the ruling Pharaoh. Arabic oaths also employ a formula, 'by X's life.'" Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 87-88.

95. Lehmann, “Biblical Oaths,” 84.

96. Ibid.

97. Greenberg, “Oath,” 359.

98. Many other equally nuanced readings of this formula exist. See Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 88-92 for a comprehensive list of these interpretations.

99. Ibid., 92.

100. Ibid.

101. Ziegler makes this argument well, drawing on the examples of Solomon's oaths in 1 Kgs 2:24 and David and Abigail's interaction in 1 Sam 25 as textual evidence. I have used the latter example to demonstrate her findings here. Ibid., 92-94.

Upon hearing of Nabal's foolhardy response to his messengers, David summons his men to battle in a state of rage and utters a vengeful oath. Until this point in the story, David has displayed commendable composure in the face of insult and even attack. Despite Saul's unyielding and unmerited attempts to kill David, the future king spares Saul's life on multiple occasions (1 Sam 24; 26). David's impassioned response to Nabal therefore underlines the extreme emotion he feels at being snubbed by the pompous sheep-shearer.

It is impossible for the attentive reader to miss the change in tone, then, in Abigail's speech to the harried king and his subsequent response to her. Indeed, Abigail's soliloquy to the troubled monarch is remarkable for its composure, considering the fact that she meets David en route to her home, armed to the teeth and with the intention of killing and pillaging everything in his path. Despite this circumstance, Abigail's reaction is measured and insightful (1 Sam 25:26):

> Now, my lord, as Yhwh lives, and as you live—Yhwh who has kept you from shedding blood and your hand from taking vengeance—may your enemies and those who seek evil against my lord be like Nabal.
>
> ועתה אדני חי יהוה וחי נפשׁך אשׁר מנעך יהוה מבוא בדמים והושׁע ידך לך ועתה יהיו כנבל איביך והמבקשׁים אל אדני רעה׃

The comparatively calm tone of this oath is underscored by David's mollified response (1 Sam 25:34):

> For as surely as Yhwh—the God of Israel—lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal so much as one male.
>
> ואולם חי יהוה אלהי ישׂראל אשׁר מנעני מהרע אתך כי לולי מהרת ותבאתי לקראתי כי אם–נותר לנבל עד–אור חבקר משתין בקיר׃

This example highlights the variance between both formulae's emotive expression. The phrase כה יעשה often involves the speaker placing their life on the line in order to emphasize the import of the oath. In contrast, while the formula חי יהוה certainly adds weight to ensuing statement, it does so without necessitating that the speaker throw caution to the wind.

Ziegler makes an equally interesting observation regarding oaths that begin with the phrase חי יהוה coupled with an additional וחי נפשך.[102] This combination occurs five times throughout Hebrew Bible (on one occasion וחי נפשך is substituted with וחי אדני המלך), each time emphasizing the speaker's respect for the addressee (1 Sam 20:3; 1 Sam 25:26; 2 Sam 15:21; 2 Kgs 2:2, 4, 6; 2 Kgs 4:30). In fact, Ziegler's research demonstrates that, in almost every case in which the formula חי יהוה is used on its own, it is spoken by a superior to an inferior. This evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that the "dual formula" of חי יהוה וחי נפשך implies deference and consistently occurs when an inferior

102. Ibid., 94-95.

addresses a superior.[103] While there are exceptions to this rule (and these cases themselves offer a wealth of interesting implications),[104] the following examples provide convincing proof of the reverential tone inherent in the formulaic use of חי יהוה וחי נפשך.

The unlikely bond between David and his rival for the throne, Jonathan, serves as the context for the first of these deferential oaths. Although the reader might well expect David, as the anointed king of Israel, to be the recipient of reverence in this interaction, it is in fact the future monarch who defers to his friend. This attitude on David's part is in keeping with his continued humility in the face of Saul's volatile attempts at his life; indeed, David has persevered in honoring Saul as God's anointed, even at great risk to his own safety (1 Sam 26:6-25). Thus it comes as no surprise when David addresses Jonathan, the king's son, with equal respect (1 Sam 20:3):

> But David swore again, saying, "Your father knows well that I have found favor in your eyes, and he thinks, 'Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.' But truly, as Yhwh lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death."
>
> וישבע עוד דוד ויאמר ידע ידע אביך כי מצאתי חן בעיניך ויאמר אל ידע זאת יהונתן פן יעצב ואולם חי יהוה וחי נפשך כי כפשע ביני ובין המות׃

The respectful tone employed by David in this scene is particularly meaningful to the reader who has grasped the unwarranted persecution suffered by David at the hands of Jonathan's father, and the unwavering humility with which David insists on addressing both parties.

David's career as Israel's king is certainly apt material for an engaging narrative, rife with both wondrous victory and dismal defeat. Long after David is established as king in Saul's place, the plot takes a downward turn when his son, Absalom, attempts to oust him from the throne. In another act of deference, David sheepishly retreats from Jerusalem along with his loyal subjects, effectively handing the city over to his rebellious son. Amidst this rather bleak setting, Ittai the Gittite approaches David, along with six hundred of his men, in a demonstration of allegiance. Once again, David takes on humble tones in his request that Ittai turn back and settle with the new king rather than accompany him into the wilderness. Ittai's response is notable for its clear articulation of respect, despite David's dejected state (2 Sam 15:21):

> But Ittai answered the king, "As Yhwh lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be—whether for death or life—there also will your servant be."

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103. Ibid., 94-105.

104. Ziegler explores these exceptions in greater detail, demonstrating their significance. For example, in the people's address to Saul regarding his willingness to sacrifice Jonathan in order to fulfill his oath, this reverential phrase it tellingly absent. Unsurprisingly, the people do not adopt deferential tones when addressing a king who has worn them thin with rash oaths and who is willing to dispose of his own son in order to preserve his pride. Ibid., 99-105.

ויען אתי את המלך ויאמר חי יהוה וחי אדני המלך כי אם במקום אשר יהיה שם אדני המלך אם למות אם לחיים כי שם יהיה עבדך:

It is interesting to note this case as the only one in which the phrase וחי אדני המלך is substituted for וחי נפשך. Ziegler makes the interesting observation that this switch is likely intended to emphasize for the reader the fact that Ittai views David as the rightful king, rather than his usurping son.[105] This reading is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Ittai's noble statement is immediately preceded by David's own reference to Absalom as king (2 Sam 15:19). Thus Ittai's reverential use of the oath and its formula, חי יהוה, serves here to emphasize the fact that David's role as king is not yet a thing of the past.

2.3.3: **חלילה**

This particular oath formula is surrounded by ambiguity. To begin with, scholars debate as to the meaning of the expression itself, which seems to originate from the root חלל, meaning "to pierce," "to play the pipe," or "to defile."[106] Ziegler sees the first and last of these definitions as working in tandem to create the final sense conjured by the term חלילה: an item pierced with holes is no longer "unblemished;" to defile, then, is to "violate[s] the whole, rendering it less than perfect in a moral or religious context."[107] Thus the phrase is regularly translated "It is a profanation for me," or "Far be it from me!"[108]

The obscurity of this formula does not end here, however. Rather, scholars question whether חלילה should even be read as an oath, noting that it is never preceded by the terms שבע or אלה.[109] In favor of this phrase qualifying as an oath formula is the fact that it regularly appears with אם, a telltale marker of the biblical oath.[110] Ziegler summarizes this view: "…the word אם following the exclamatory חלילה plus an indirect object indicates that a conditional imprecation is called down upon someone (usually oneself)…thereby producing and oath-like utterance."[111] Although some ambiguity remains as to whether this phrase can be identified as an oath formula, it is beneficial to examine the term here in light of the fact that it is widely accepted as indicatory of a biblical oath.

The phrase חלילה only occurs twenty-one times throughout Hebrew Bible, making it difficult for scholars to identify norms from exceptions in its usage. One characteristic that sets this formula

105. Ibid., 97.
106. Ibid., 127.
107. Ibid., 127-28.
108. Ibid., 128.
109. Lehmann, “Biblical Oaths,” 82.
110. Waltke, and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 42.2.2.
111. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 129.

apart from all others is the fact that it is never transgressed.[112] In other words, in every case in which this particular statement is used, the oath it introduces is carried through to completion. This fact is certainly notable in comparison with the phrase כה יעשה in particular, which frequently identifies an oath that remains unfulfilled. In explanation of the veracity of asseverations prefaced by חלילה, Ziegler posits, "the explicit mention of defilement may serve as a stronger deterrent, or, perhaps, a more persuasive recoil than a statement made without the explicit חלילה."[113] The formidable connotation inherent in this oath becomes even more apparent in light of a few examples.

There is only one instance in which this phrase is uttered from the mouth of God.[114] Specifically, the formula is here constructed חלילה לי, and appears contradictory emerging from God's mouth. This instance occurs in God's proclamation against Eli and his sons (1 Sam 2:30):

> Therefore Yhwh, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,' but now Yhwh declares: 'Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.'
>
> לכן נאם יהוה אלהי ישׂראל אמור אמרתי ביתך ובית אביך יתהלכו לפני עד עולם ועתה נאם יהוה חלילה לי כי מכבדי אכבד ובזי יקלו׃

As Ziegler points out, this rare construction is paired with another exceptional circumstance: God has decided to act against his own word.[115] Scholars have argued that this latter circumstance explains the former, suggesting that in this case, the act of following through on his word would in fact defile God himself, who is dismayed by the irreligious behavior of Eli's sons.[116]

An earlier example places God once more as the surprising recipient of this oath, although this time Abraham is the speaker rather than the deity himself. In the face of God's imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham offers a bold challenge to the deity's plans (Gen 18:25):

> Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?
>
> חללה לך מעשׂת כדבר הזה להמית צדיק עם רשׁע והיה כצדיק כרשׁע חללה לך השׁפט כל הארץ לא יעשׂה משׁפט׃

Although this imprecation seems sacrilegious when addressed to God, Ziegler points out that, at the heart of Abraham's statement is a blatant contradiction, with which he takes issue: "Shall not the

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112. Ibid., 133.
113. Ibid.
114. Ibid., 142-44.
115. Ibid., 143.
116. Ibid.

Judge of all the earth do what is just?" Thus the potency (and apparent apostasy) of Abraham's outcry is directed not against God himself, but rather against his proposed action, which would conflict with the very identity of the deity.

2.4: The Biblical Vow and Its Formula

The scope of a study on biblical vows is limited in comparison to that of oaths, due to the fact that Hebrew Bible contains only five narrative occurrences of the vow (Gen 28:20-22; Num 21:2; Judg 11:30-31; 1 Sam 1:11; 2 Sam 15:8). As opposed to the various formulae that identify oaths, biblical vows all function according to one formula (although each vow employs this formula in a slightly different way). Cartledge provides a thorough summary of scholarly work on the votive formula to-date, subsequently providing his own rendition of the basic structure of vows in Hebrew Bible.[117] Cartledge's formula summarizes previous scholars' attempts while remaining clear and easy to identity; for this reason I have chosen to use it here. The formula is as follows:[118]

1. Narrative introduction
2. Address to the deity
3. Protasis of the vow (condition)
4. Apodosis of the vow (promise)

Cartledge begins by observing that all narrative vows are necessarily "literary adaptations" rather than "transcripts" of the vows themselves.[119] Thus the first item of the vow formula: a narrative introduction. This first element is not technically part of the vow, but it does function to inform the reader of the circumstances from which the vow emerges. Additionally, Cartledge notes that the second aspect, an address to the deity, is rarely explicit. In fact, Hannah's vow is the only one that articulates a direct call to God; as we have already seen, every biblical vow occurs in the context of prayer and therefore includes an implicit request of the deity.

All narrative vows, however, include the third and fourth elements of Cartledge's formula. The protasis is comprised of a dependent clause: "*im* followed by one or more imperfect or perfect verbs, all attached by *w*-," while the apodosis contains the speaker's promise: "a perfect consecutive verb, sometimes followed by imperfects."[120] This arrangement will quickly become apparent in the following examples.

Jacob's vow (Gen 28:20-22) includes the first, third, and fourth elements of the votive

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117. Cartledge, *Vows*, 135-45.
118. Ibid., 145.
119. Ibid., 144.
120. Ibid., 17.

formula. To begin with, the surrounding narrative provides the context from which his pledge is motivated (the first characteristic of a biblical vow): Jacob wakes from a dream in which Yhwh stands beside him and promises to protect and sustain him and his offspring. Although Jacob's vow does not include a direct address to the deity (the second characteristic), it does refer to God in the protasis, in which Jacob outlines the conditions of his vow (God's watchful care on his journey, provision of food and clothes, and a safe return). If God proves faithful on these terms, Jacob vows to accept Yhwh as his chosen deity and pay tithes on all that he acquires (apodosis). Cartledge organizes each part of this vow according to his formula:[121]

(1) and Jacob vowed a vow, saying,
(2)
(3) 'If God will be with me,
and will watch over me on this journey I am taking,
and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear,
and will return me in peace to the house of my father,
(4) then Yahweh will be my God,
and this stone which I have set up for a pillar will be a house of God,
and of all that you give to me, I will surely give a tenth to you.'

Jacob's vow, according to Cartledge, is "the most detailed of all the biblical vows."[122] It is worth noting that there are multiple conditions to his vow, and this despite the fact that Yhwh has just concluded his promise to provide for the patriarch and his family. Indeed, in the face of the unconditional terms of Yhwh's visitation, Jacob's vow appears to be nothing more than haggling.[123]

Israel's pledge (Num 21:2) is an interesting example because it is the only instance of a communal vow in biblical narrative. Facing an attack by a Canaanite king (narrative introduction), Israel cries out for divine aid (protasis/condition), in return for which they will decimate their enemies (apodosis/promise). Again, it is helpful to consult Cartledge's formulaic structure:[124]

(1) and Israel vowed a vow to Yahweh, and he said:
(2)
(3) 'If you will surely give this people into my hand,
(4) then I will put their cities under the ban.'

Note the change to singular verbal forms (*he* said, *my* hand, *I* will put) in the expression of Israel's

121. Ibid., 149.
122. Ibid.
123. Ibid., 166-75.
124. Ibid., 145.

corporate vow. Emerging from their wilderness wanderings, which were fraught with dissent and disunity, Israel displays "unanimity and trust in Yahweh" in their victory over the king of Arad.[125] The syntax of this particular vow reveals Israel's (albeit temporary) unity as they embark on Canaanite conquest.

2.5: Conclusion

While the formulae examined above are helpful in distinguishing between oaths and vows, they contribute much more to a literary study of biblical narrative. As I have demonstrated, each formula has a particular structure and syntax by which it operates; however, biblical oaths and vows frequently rearrange or omit sections of these formulae in order to effect plot development and characterisation. Thus Ittai adds a clause to his oath emphasizing his loyalty to David, despite the recently-ousted king's dejection. The unique arrangement of Ittai's oath highlights his integrity and provides the reader with hope that, despite Absalom's successful coup, David may once again rule as king. Similarly, the lengthy apodosis of Jephthah's vow provides critics, who have struggled to interpret the judge's fatal vow for centuries, with proof that his promise may not have been as unthinking as some would suggest. In conclusion, the preceding analysis of biblical formulae will prove particularly useful when applied in the following section on the literary usage of oaths and vows.

2.6: Oaths and Vows as Literary Devices

When considered for their literary value, both oaths and vows play an important role in plot development and characterisation. With her analysis of the oath as a literary device in Shakespeare's Henry VI plays, Kelly demonstrates the oath's capacity to create plot tension and stir up chaos within a narrative.[126] Other critics, such as Cline in her analysis of Chaucer's characters, have observed the proclivity of oaths to shape the reader's perception of a character's personality and purpose.[127] In the following section, I examine the ways in which oaths and vows function as literary tools in Hebrew Bible, focusing primarily on plot development and characterisation. As the following biblical examples demonstrate, oaths and vows can be used to draw a reader into the movement of a plot and to round out a character's poetic portrayal.

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125. Ibid., 163.
126. Kelly, “Oaths in Shakespeare’s Henry VI Plays.”
127. Cline, “Four Chaucer Saints”; Davidheiser, “*Sturm Und Drang*.”

2.6.1: The Role of Oaths and Vows in Biblical Plot Development

In Hebrew Bible, oaths and vows can both promote the steady progression of plot and initiate a storyline's sudden disruption or disarray. Sternberg's analysis of the oath between Abraham and his servant and the subsequent retrieval of Rebekah from her relatives provides a helpful backdrop when considering the oath as a tool that facilitates a plot's forward movement. According to Sternberg, the stage is set prior to the oath between Abraham and his servant: Ishmael and Isaac have been arranged side-by-side and a comparison between their respective stories has been established. Sternberg highlights the "landmarks" of Ishmael's story thus far, noting that Abraham's first son was born late in the patriarch's life, that he closely escapes death due to "timely divine intervention," and, finally, that Ishmael's mother facilitates his marriage to an Egyptian woman.[128] The observant reader is aware that the first two of these events are shared in common between Ishmael and his younger brother Isaac. The fact that, after his near-death experience, God promises to make Ishmael into a "great nation" is also mirrored in the fact that Isaac's descendants are predicted to be "as the stars of heaven" following the latter son's close encounter with death (Gen 21:18; 22:17). This added duality serves as another clue for the reader: shortly after Ishmael is promised numerous descendants, he is wedded to the Egyptian woman.[129] The plot is thus poised in anticipation of Isaac's marriage, which will bring the brothers' stories into full alignment.

The expectant reader is therefore intrigued by the narrative's seemingly abrupt turn, following God's promise of offspring to Isaac, to a genealogy of Abraham's extended family. Two female characters emerge from this catalogue of fathers and sons: Rebekah and Ma'acah (Gen 22:20-24).[130] Could one of these two be the wife appointed for Isaac? It is at this pivotal point in the narrative, amidst the suspense created by Isaac's need for a wife, that Abraham's oath takes place. Sternberg focuses here on the fact that Abraham's perspective is limited, an insight he gains from the fact that the patriarch does not direct his servant to either of these women, or indeed, to his own family at all, but rather away from the surrounding Canaanites.[131] This despite the fact that the reader has already been cued to consider Abraham's kin as the source for Isaac's upcoming marriage. What Sternberg overlooks, however, is the prominent role played by the patriarch's oath in lurching the plot forward once more from a suspenseful standstill. Despite the fact that Abraham's directions to his servant are not as specific as the informed reader might hope, his instructions set the plot moving towards an

128. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 132.
129. Ibid.
130. Ibid., 133.
131. Ibid., 133-34.

awaited event: Isaac's marriage. Thus the oath here serves as a moment in which the source of plot tension (Isaac's need for a wife) is identified and the storyline progresses towards this end.

Oaths as devices by which to control a narrative's plot do not always work to facilitate the orderly progression of storyline. Instead, as Kelly has noted of the oath's use in Shakespeare's dramas, "The complete disregard for the sanctity of an oath by many of the characters in the Henry VI plays illuminates the dramatic situation of chaos revealed."[132] Indeed, oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible can operate in similar ways, instigating a downward spiral in plot movement or initiating havoc on the narrative, whether or not they are fulfilled. An enlightening example is Jephthah's unfortunate vow, which leads him to sacrifice his daughter (Judg 11:30-40). Critics have debated as to whether or not the judge's adherence to his vow should be commended, and whether or not God was ultimately pleased by Jephthah's apparently unflinching piety.[133] I would argue, however, that the reader gains perspective on this debate by considering the overall progression of plot following Jephthah's fulfilment of the fatal vow. In the verses immediately following his daughter's death, the judge enters into a fracas with the tribe of Ephraim, ultimately (and, again, apparently unflinchingly) slaughtering 42,000 of his fellow-Israelites. The narrative havoc that ensues after the fulfilment of Jephthah's vow (and which persists throughout the rest of the book of Judges) arguably reveals the narrator's position on the death of the judge's daughter. Either way, Jephthah's vow can be pinpointed as a moment in the narrative in which the plot takes a turn from bad to worse.

2.6.2: The Role of Oaths and Vows in Biblical Characterisation

Not only do oaths and vows function as plot devices, but they also play a primary role in characterisation. In his fascinating article exploring the use of oaths in plays written by Goethe and his counterparts during the late eighteenth century *Sturm und Drang* movement, Davidheiser highlights this role. Oaths here are employed to reveal a character's passion, as in the case of Anselmo's rash oath of vengeance in Gerstenberg's *Ugolino*, or to emphasise another's fickle nature, as with Desportes' insincere pledge of love in Lenz's *Die Soldaten*.[134] This tactic is equally prevalent within biblical literature, in which many characters are defined by the oaths or vows they make, the reasons for which they make them, and whether or not they are ultimately able to keep their word. In fact, Alter has argued that speech serves as a more reliable indicator of character in Hebrew Bible than actions; how much more so when a character's spoken word carries the potency of an oath or

132. Kelly, “Oaths in Shakespeare’s Henry VI Plays,” 359.
133. Levenson, *Beloved Son*, 14.
134. Davidheiser, “*Sturm Und Drang*,” 134-35.

vow?[135]

Not surprisingly, oaths and vows in biblical narrative are used equally to highlight a character's weakness or strength. Indeed, both forms of emphatic statement provide the reader with insight into the multifaceted workings of a character's psyche. Saul's impetuous oath in the face of battle, imposed unthinkingly on his weary troops, is a fitting example of biblical characterisation (1 Sam 14:24-46). Saul here is placed opposite his son Jonathan, who acts as his foil throughout the narrative. To begin with, Saul takes credit for his son's conquest over a Philistine garrison, a fact that the narrator draws the reader's attention to immediately (1 Sam 13:2-4). Saul, accompanied by three thousand Israelite soldiers, positions himself for battle in Michmash; meanwhile, Jonathan, along with a troop one third the size of his father's, defeats a garrison of Philistines in Gibeah. Upon hearing of Jonathan's success, Saul proclaims the victory far and wide, but apparently downplays his son's valiant role: "And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, 'Let the Hebrews hear.' And all Israel heard it and said that *Saul* had defeated the garrison of the Philistines…" (1 Sam 13:3b-4a, emphasis mine). Perhaps one could argue that the Israelite nation simply attributes Jonathan's victory to his father's military leadership, and that the people have his son's success in mind when they extol Saul. But the narrative soon reveals that Jonathan is not recognised as a military hero: rather, the young prince and his armour bearer later slip effortlessly away from Saul and his troops and are not missed until the whole company is counted (1 Sam 14:1-17). Nevertheless, the narrator spares no detail in the portrayal of Jonathan as the real hero of the story. Indeed, the prince scales a cliff to meet his enemies and, accompanied only by his armour bearer, slaughters twenty Philistine soldiers and sends yet another garrison into disarray.[136] This alongside the preceding narrative, which tells of Saul's inability to wait for the prophet Samuel's arrival due to his trepidation at the sight of approaching Philistine troops. When Samuel arrives to find Saul disobeying his instruction and offering sacrifices without him, the prophet strips Saul of royal prospects and predicts that God will find another to fill his place as king. The story of Jonathan's courageous conquest, which follows immediately from Saul's pride and humiliation, thus casts the two characters in stark relief to one another.

In response to the confusion instigated amongst the Philistines by Jonathan's attack, Saul and his army pursue hotly after the enemy. Just as the reader might begin to regain hope in Saul's

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135. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 117; Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 18.

136. Garsiel provides a similar reading of this narrative, positing that Jonathan acts here as a foil for Saul. As added evidence for this interpretation, Garsiel draws attention to the vocabulary of the narrative surrounding Jonathan's attack on the Philistine garrison: while Saul is 'sitting,' Jonathan 'goes,' 'crosses,' 'ascends,' and 'smites,' Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 86.

capabilities as a military leader, the king imposes a senseless oath on his battle-weary troops: "Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies" (1 Sam 14:24). The battle, thus far, is proceeding in Saul's favour: even those Hebrews who had previously defected to the Philistine army return to fight alongside their fellow-Israelites. What then motivates the king to speak this debilitating oath over his men? The conditional clause of this oath is clear, namely, that the Israelite army must be driven by their hunger to secure Saul's victory ("until…I am avenged on my enemies"). Saul's impetuous oath here speaks loudly of a bruised ego, which motivates the king to grasp wildly at a display of power over his troops. Little does he realise, however, that this oath will serve only to force his men to make a choice between himself and his successful son.

The narrator informs us that Jonathan (who presumably was still wreaking havoc on Israel's enemies at the time) did not hear his father's oath (1 Sam 14:27). Thus Jonathan unwittingly tastes the honey he finds in the forrest, and, when informed of his violation of the oath by his fellow-soldiers, the prince laments his father's foolishness. "How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great" (1 Sam 14:30). Thus Saul's rash oath hampers the conquest initiated by his son. When Saul later requests God's leading on the battle and is met with silence, he commands that lots be taken to discover the guilty party. The lot falls to Jonathan, who proceeds to confess his unknowing violation of Saul's oath. At this point, the narrative reaches a climax and Saul, who is poised ready to kill his own son, is viewed over against Jonathan, the story's unmistakeable hero. Not surprisingly, the Israelite people rise to Jonathan's defence, countering Saul's oath with their own: "Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel? Far from it! As Yhwh lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day" (1 Sam 14:45). In this final scene, Saul is further humiliated by a revolt motivated by the people's preference for his son and subsequently retreats in shame from battle (1 Sam 14:46).

This example illustrates how an oath is used to illuminate Saul's pride, weakness, insecurity, and ultimate humiliation. Not all oaths and vows are used to highlight a character's weakness (for example, Hannah's vow reveals her piety and strength); rather, both forms of asseveration frequently bring to the surface a character's priorities and demonstrate their integrity or lack thereof. Indeed, the emphatic statements made by characters in moments of pathos or passion are often utilised by biblical authors in the complicated art of characterisation.

2.7: Conclusion

Oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible, as I have demonstrated, are both technically intricate and literarily effective. The preceding analysis of oaths and vows provides a vital foundation from which to proceed to an exploration of specific examples in Hebrew Bible. To begin with, it is important to understand that, while oaths and vows are distinct in many respects, they frequently function in similar ways. This discovery offers explanation for the decision to focus on narratives involving both types of emphatic statement in the following chapters. Although the book of Ruth and 1 Samuel 25 both revolve around an oath, Judges 11 and 1 Samuel 1-2:11 are shaped by vows. Nevertheless, because these two forms of asseveration bear much in common—both syntactically and functionally—it is helpful to consider them in conjunction in the following chapters.

Still, it is important to be able to identify and oath from a vow, and visa versa. While these two types of expression do bear much in common, it is imperative for the rest of this study that they be distinguishable as well. For example, Ruth's oath (which is addressed to her mother-in-law, relies on a conditional curse, and employs an oath formula) differs from Hannah's vow (which is addressed to God, includes a conditional promise, and utilises the vow formula). In analysing these two narratives (along with the others examined in upcoming chapters), it is important to recognise the distinct formulae employed, and to be able to perceive when a given formula deviates from its usual structure. Indeed, these departures from the norm often serve as clues to the intricate workings of plot and characterisation.

Finally, and perhaps above all, it is essential that the prominent literary function of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible be appreciated. Whether in the creation of plot tension or the elaboration of a given character trait, both types of statement provide an efficacious tool for the biblical author. This aspect of oaths and vows is particularly relevant for the remainder of this study, which aims to elucidate their effects on female characters in Hebrew Bible and the narratives they inhabit.

Ruth: More To You Than Seven Sons

Do not entreat me to leave you, to turn from following you, because where you go I will go, and where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yhwh do thus to me and more if even death parts me from you!

אל תפגעי בי לעזבך לשוב מאחריך כי אל אשר תלכי אלך ובאשר תליני אלין עמך עמי ואלהיך אלהי:
באשר תמותי אמות ושם אקבר כה יעשה יהוה לי וכה יסיף כי המות יפריד ביני ובינך:

3.1: Introduction

The literary power of an oath is nowhere more evident than in the book of Ruth. At the outset of the narrative, Ruth's promise catalyses the story that follows: the plot is driven along by the question of whether she will fulfil the extreme terms of her oath and to what end. Not only does Ruth's oath prove the efficacy of an emphatic statement in shaping the contours of a narrative plot, but the unique elements of her pledge underline a central theme of her story: the juxtaposition of a Moabite widow with Israelite patriarchs and matriarchs of renown. This informative comparison becomes a defining theme for the character of Ruth, who is unmatched even among Israel's progenitors for her valour and loyalty.[137]

The story has hardly begun and Ruth is promising to die and be buried with Naomi, despite the fact that the latter has only discouraged Ruth from remaining in her company. Until this juncture, the plot has descended at a precipitous rate as Elimelech and his family move away from their home in search of food and in quick succession father and sons pass away. The grief apparent in Naomi's dialogue with Ruth and Orpah only continues the downward spiral until, unexpectedly, Ruth's positive act of loyalty breathes life into the narrative. The plot continues from this point in hopeful ascent—building on the question of whether Ruth will remain faithful to her pledge—and finally reaches its crescendo on the threshing floor. This is a moment loaded with significance for the story as a whole, which explains the myriad connections to other texts that occur in the book's third chapter. Following Ruth and Boaz's tryst on the threshing floor, the book's fourth chapter addresses

137. Both Ruth and Boaz are characterised by the weighty descriptive term חיל (Ruth 2:1; 3:11), which conjures strength, wealth, and moral worth (see Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 298). In his article comparing Ruth with the אשת חיל of Prov 31, Goh notes that this particular form of strength is often God-given, and therefore all the more notable (see for example Deut 8:18; 33:11; Isa 61:1; Prov 13:22), Samuel T.S. Goh, "Ruth as a Superior Woman of חיל?: A Comparison Between Ruth and the 'Capable' Woman in Proverbs 31.10-31," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 4 (2014), 488-89.

the practical terms of their union, introduces their son as David's progenitor, and wraps up the short story with a happy ending.

What follows is a closer examination of the comparative connections drawn between Ruth and matriarchs and patriarchs as a poignant thread that runs throughout the book. To begin with, these informative allusions are traced throughout the narrative as a whole, with special attention to the story's third chapter in which, at the plot's pinnacle, they speak the loudest. Once a case has been made for the pervasiveness of these links throughout the text, a thorough analysis of Ruth's oath will reveal that her promise speaks volumes to this very theme. The unique elements of her oath—particularly the lengthy prologue—exemplify Ruth's affinity to patriarchs and matriarchs before her, adding resonance to the subsequent points of connection already drawn out from surrounding context. The placement of Ruth's oath at the outset of the narrative serves as a means to introduce and underscore her comparative courage and faithfulness amongst characters of greater renown, acting as both a clue and a catalyst for the story that unfolds thereafter.

3.2: Poetic Analysis of the Book of Ruth

One does not have to look far in the book of Ruth to find clear allusions to the stories of Israel's forebears. Elimelech's departure in time of famine recalls similar journeys made by Abram, Isaac, and Jacob, and Boaz's commendation of Ruth (2:11) conjures a poignant connection to Abram's call in Gen 12. Ruth and Boaz's encounter on the threshing floor evokes connections to a host of heroines from the book of Genesis, while somehow simultaneously summoning Jacob's deception of his father in pursuit of blessing (Gen 27). In case these evocative connections escape readerly attention, the elders at Bethlehem's gate make them explicit in the blessing they speak over Ruth and Boaz as the story draws to a close (4:11b-12):

> May Yhwh make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you make Ephrathah strong and give a name to Bethlehem; may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring that Yhwh will give to you from this young woman.
>
> יתן יהוה את האשׁה הבאה אל ביתך כרחל וכלאה אשׁר בנו שׁתיהם את בית ישׂראל ועשׂה חיל באפרתה וקרא שׁם בבית לחם: ויהי ביתך כבית פרץ אשׁר ילדה תמר ליהודה מן הזרע אשׁר יתן יהוה לך מן הנערה הזאת:

This weighty remark at the end of the book draws taut the threads of allusion that have already been woven between Ruth's story and those of Rachel, Leah, and Tamar. Not only this, but the elders' blessing serves as an overt nod to the broad and defining theme of Israel's origin stories, which are picked up throughout the narrative and recast in light of a Moabite woman's surprising acts of commitment to Yhwh and his people.

Scholars have oft noted the symmetrical and precise structure of Ruth's story, with mirrored

elements refracting and repeating details between the first and fourth chapters, as well as the second and third.[138] The art and precision of this structure in itself is rightfully the subject of many an analytic conversation; for the purpose of this study, it is worth simply noting the pivotal position of the book's third chapter in the narrative's overall arrangement. As Bertman has observed, the book's four chapters mirror each other with inverted parallels (A B C C B A), with the book's first and final chapters both dealing in turn with a family's history, ties of kinship, and a speech by the Bethlehemite women.[139] Within this outer framework, Ruth has two rendezvous with Boaz: first as a stranger amongst his harvesters in chapter two, and then (with much more intimacy) as a woman with a night-time proposition in chapter three. The threshing floor scene is positioned at the heart of a mirrored structure: it is here that the book's driving questions (the fulfilment of Ruth's dramatic promise and—by extension—the continuation of Elimelech's line) converge and find their resolution. It is not surprising, then, that the book's third chapter is also rife with textual allusion to the stories of Israel's matriarchs and patriarchs, given the importance of this theme in the definition of Ruth's character. In light of the significance of this textual moment in the book of Ruth, the threshing floor scene provides an informative focal point for the first half of this study, which will identify the prevalence and import of matriarchal and patriarchal allusions in the book of Ruth.

3.2.1: 'Bed-Trick' Stories

Amidst the thrum of plot tension at this pivotal moment on the threshing floor, numerous allusions appear to stories of matriarchs and patriarchs who share one defining trait: a propensity for trickery. In particular, the details of Ruth's approach to a slumbering Boaz and their ensuing encounter initiates a colourful backdrop for the scene by conjuring the 'bed-trick'.[140] This reoccurring technique amongst matriarchs involves a woman approaching a man under the cover of darkness or a

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138. See William A. Tooman, *Reading Ruth* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2022), 11-20; Stephen Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 2 (1965); Edward F Campbell, Jr, *Ruth: A New Translation With Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1975), 14-16; J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: A Practical Guide,* trans. Ineke Smit (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 1999), 213; Yael Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015), 461-65. Korpel provides a thorough summary of previous studies on the structure of Ruth, from Myers (1955) to Smelik (2000), along with his own analysis of the text, Marjo C.A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001).

139. Bertman helpfully provides a visual representation of this structure in his short article, Bertman, "Symmetrical Design." See also Tooman, *Reading Ruth*, 16, 18.

140. See Doniger's monograph dedicated to the bed-trick for a close examination of this motif throughout a vast range of texts, from ancient Hindu law, to Jewish narrative, to Freudian psychoanalysis, to Hollywood film, Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

veil and enticing him to have sexual relations with her in order to preserve a lineage. The exact number of bed-tricks in Hebrew Bible is debatable;[141] for our purposes it is most interesting to consider Lot's daughters and Tamar in comparison and contrast with Ruth.[142]

The connections between Ruth and Lot's daughters are myriad. In a clever narrative move, Ruth is brought full-circle and stands alongside the women whose (albeit troubling) ingenuity established the Moabite line. Ruth, like her ancestors before her, carries the weight of the preservation of a family line. Not only this, but the scheme that Ruth devises to meet this need bears many similarities to the bed-trick performed on Lot by his own daughters. Under the cover of darkness, Lot's daughters each (on consecutive nights) get their father drunk; once he is sufficiently intoxicated, they lie (שכב) with him and rise (קום) before he has opportunity to realise what has happened. In both cases, the daughters conceive and bear sons who secure the lineage of their father (and grand-father), Lot.

In a similar vein, Ruth follows Naomi's instructions not to approach Boaz on the threshing floor until he has eaten and drunk (Ruth 3:3). True, there is nothing here to suggest that Boaz need be intoxicated in order for the plan to be carried to completion, and yet it is a significant detail that Naomi views both a full stomach and a few drinks as a necessary prerequisite to Ruth's success on the threshing floor. Indeed, the text goes out of its way to specify that Boaz, after eating and drinking, ambles over to the threshing floor with "a merry heart" (וייטב לבו). Whether or not he is inebriated, it would seem that Boaz's feasting has put him in a favourable mood, and one that is more likely to receive Ruth on her mission.

Once Boaz is settled in his place, Ruth sneaks over to him "in secret" (בלט).[143] This clever move serves as a double allusion to the story of Lot's daughters: not only does Ruth manage to

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141. For instance, Jael's sinister encounter with Sisera in Judg 4:17-22 shares common features with other more commonly identified bed-trick narratives. Jael provides the weary king with a drink, which, as we shall see, is a key characteristic in most of the trickster stories. Of course, rather than getting him drunk with wine, Jael lulls Sisera to sleep with milk—it is his slumbering state that provides another key element of the trick: darkness or cover. Upon Sisera's arrival in Jael's tent, the language of the text becomes strangely sexual, despite the fact that there is little about their fatal interaction that is intimate. Of course, there is much that is divergent between Jael's scheme and the rest of the bed-trick stories, not least of all the fact that it culminates in murder, rather than conception.

142. See Tooman, *Reading Ruth*, 97-102; Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182; Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 83-87. Doniger notes the connection between Ruth and Tamar as instigators of the bed-trick, as well as Leah and Rachel, but overlooks allusions to Lot and his daughters, Doniger, *The Bedtrick*, 259-63.

143. Jeremy Schipper, "The Use of *Blṭ* in Ruth 3:7," *Vestus Testamentum* 66, no. 4 (2016).

approach the man in question without being noticed, but the Hebrew term for secrecy (לט) provides an opportunity for the narrator to drop Lot's name at a moment in which, due to the throb of plot tension, the reader cannot miss it.[144] Not only this, but Ruth goes on to arise (קום) after her interlude with Boaz and, later, to bear him a son who will preserve a most vital lineage for the people of Israel.

Although Ruth's likening to Lot's daughters highlights her ingenuity in executing a plan and securing her place as the matriarch of an important line, it has obvious negative connotations as well. The means by which Lot's daughters achieve their goal, perhaps even their motivation for doing so, is hardly commendable. As Ziegler notes, the women of Moab come to be associated with sexual immorality and pagan worship, perhaps as a result of their problematic origins.[145] Thus, at the very least, the reader is brought to a place of uncertainty upon recognising these connections at the outset of Ruth's actions on the threshing floor: will her character remain consistent with the fidelity evoked by her oath, or will she reveal her true (and perhaps expected) colours by following in the footsteps of her ancestors and engaging in a questionable sexual ruse?

The bed-trick narrative that contains arguably the most allusions to Ruth's story is that of Tamar and Judah. The theme of levarite marriage links these two texts, but there are also a plethora of textual allusions between the two stories.[146] Jackson provides a list of these common features: an Israelite male (Judah/Elimelech) relocates to a foreign land, in which his sons marry foreign women. In each story, two sons die before bearing offspring.[147] In Gen 38, Judah's sons are killed by Yhwh, who refuses to tolerate their iniquity. In the case of Ruth, the text is silent as to the reason behind Mahlon and Chilion's deaths; this gap leaves the reader wondering whether these men, like their counterparts in the previous story, were wicked, or whether their deaths serve only to remove them from the stage so that Ruth can emerge as heroine.

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144. Tooman, *Reading Ruth*, 99.

145. Ziegler, *Ruth*, 64. See Num 25.

146. Ibid., 395-407. Ziegler provides a thorough discussion of the many thematic allusions to and ultimate diversions from levirate law in the book of Ruth. Doniger notes that the correct enactment of levirate law (as it is defined in Deut 25:5-10) would require Boaz's union with *Naomi*, his widowed relative. This leads to new levels of intrigue in Doniger's reading of the text: it is Naomi who should rightly approach Boaz on the threshing floor but Boaz prefers the younger Ruth and is delighted when the latter makes her request, Doniger, *The Bedtrick*, 260-63. Embry provides a new reading that proposes Num 27 (the story of Zelophehad's daughters) as a legal framework which, in conjunction with Lev 25 (kinsman redeemer) and Deut 25 (levarite law), illumines the complex legalities at play in the book of Ruth, Bradley Embry, "Legalities in the Book of Ruth: A Renewed Look," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 1 (2016). Each of these interpretative angles provides useful insight into Ruth's story. I would argue that the primary purpose of the vestiges of the levirate tradition that appear in Ruth's story is to allude to Gen 38, in which the theme of levirate marriage is picked up but similarly misapplied.

147. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 181.

A similar gap exists concerning the reason for Ruth and Orpah's childlessness. In fact, the text creates this problem in the first place by specifying that both women were married "about ten years" (כעשׂר שׁנים), a seemingly unnecessary detail. Had the text simply noted the deaths of Mahlon and Chilion after their acquisition of wives and prior to bearing any children, the reader would surmise that the men simply didn't live long enough to create progeny. However, the specific detail that these men had been with their wives for about a decade prior to their deaths certainly raises a question as to why this would be the case. It is interesting to note here that Abraham is said to have been living in Canaan for a total of ten years (מקץ עשׂר שׁנים לשׁבת אברם בארץ כנען, Gen 16:3) at the point at which he turns to Hagar as the possible mother of his offspring. If nothing else, this indicates that—in biblical terms—a decade is enough time to create impatience regarding the arrival of an heir.

Perhaps this subtle clue as to Mahlon and Chilion's inability to bear children is a brief nod in the direction of Er and Onan. As if this were not enough, these character's names are similarly notable: Judah's eldest sons, Er and Onan, conjure up evil (רע) and complaint (אנן) respectively.[148] In equally dismal terms, Mahlon and Chilion derive their names from the roots for 'sickness' (חלה) and 'frailty' (כלה).[149] Perhaps the reader should infer from these shared traits that the latter men were similarly despised by God; regardless, the overlap between these four characters serves to strengthen an already apparent allusion between the stories of Tamar and Ruth. This connection, of course, is only confirmed by the fact that both women perform (some version of) a bed-trick in order to secure the line that should have been provided in the first place by their erring or ailing husbands.

Jackson notes that both narratives take place during a festal period: sheep-shearing (in the story of Tamar) and barley harvest (in the case of Ruth).[150] Perhaps we are to infer from this detail

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148. The name Er (ער) rearranges the consonants of the Hebrew term for 'bad' or 'evil' (רע) and thereby creates an ominous *atbash* with the name (one that proves to be accurate to Er's character). The connotation inherent in Onan's name is twofold—the root אנן could refer to 'complaining' or 'wickedness'. See Ellen Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue With Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives," *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 1 (1997), 10, 18-19, on the etymologies of Er and Onan's names. Van Wolde also draws out interesting connections between the names and actions of Onan and Naomi's unnamed closer kinsman (פלני אלמני), both of whom shirk some form of levarite duty.

149. See Ziegler, *Ruth*, 113-17, on the meaning and significance of Mahlon and Chilion's names. Initially, Ziegler argues for more positive connotations for these two names (for example: *mahol*, to dance; *keli*, vessel—suggesting fulness or completion). Ziegler is strangely troubled by the idea that Naomi might have given her sons names with negative meanings, despite the prevalence of this practice throughout Hebrew Bible (e.g. בן–אוני, Gen 35:18; all three of Hosea's children, Hosea 1:4-9). Ziegler does go on to acknowledge that the midrashim prefer a negative interpretation of Mahlon and Chilion's names.

150. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 181.

that Judah had been feasting and drinking prior to his liaison with Tamar; in any case, the text does not mention the details of the festivities in Judah's case, which leads the reader to believe that the patriarch is entirely sober when he requests Tamar's sexual services.[151] In another divergence from the typical characteristics of a bed-trick, Tamar manages to fool Judah in broad daylight, rather than under the cover of darkness. She does so by shedding her widow's garb and donning a veil, details which perhaps serve as yet another allusion to Ruth's actions. Naomi carefully instructs Ruth to put on her "best clothes" (ושׂמת שׂמלתך עליך) prior to her visit to Boaz at the threshing floor. Thus, both women employ a change of clothes and a cover of some sort (either veil or darkness) to achieve their ultimate goal of conceiving a child.

In an interesting turn of events (particularly in Tamar's case), both women are ultimately declared virtuous by the men whom they solicit. Upon Judah's discovery that the woman he assumed to be a sex worker was, in fact, his daughter-in-law, Judah pronounces Tamar more righteous than himself, a seemingly accurate observation given that her intentions were to fulfil levirate law, while his were simply to engage in recreational sex. Boaz, too, evaluates Ruth's actions and finds her to be a woman of valour (אשׁת חיל). In fact, Boaz extends this assessment to his community as a whole, all of whom view Ruth in this favourable light (Ruth 3:11). Thus, in contrast to Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth both emerge from their respective ruses not only having achieved their goal, but also as exemplary characters.

Nevertheless, the overarching theme of deception pervades both narratives and perhaps this is the point: with her actions at the threshing floor, Ruth could be seen to join the company of a notorious group of tricksters, from Abram (who fooled his hosts into believing that Sarai was his sister), to Jacob (perhaps most notorious of all), to Joseph and his brothers. These stand alongside the trickster matriarchs already mentioned, and their cumulative acts of deception paint a picture of a rather troubling history of trickery, from which Ruth appears to draw. This, at least, is one possible interpretation of the syntactical and thematic connections that weave Ruth's story back into those of the wily matriarchs and patriarchs before her.

As already noted, the similarities between Ruth and the trickster matriarchs are further highlighted by the town elders in the book's concluding chapter. Interestingly, Ruth's arrival at the threshing floor and the events that subsequently take place there are viewed only by the reader; none of the story's characters, aside from Ruth and Boaz, are aware of the exchange that takes place

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151. Doniger notes that *The Testament of Judah* depicts a drunken Judah and suggests that the patriarch's inebriation might be implied by the surrounding context in Gen 38. Nevertheless, the fact that this detail is never explicitly stated leaves room for Judah to be further implicated by his sobriety in the moment, Doniger, *The Bedtrick*, 258.

between these two under the cover of darkness. Thus, when the elders pronounce a blessing on Boaz, likening Ruth to Rachael, Leah, and Tamar in her ability to produce children who will play a key part in Israelite lineage (4:12), the irony of their statement is apparent only to Boaz and the reader.[152] Indeed, Jackson views this speech as an "inside joke" between narrator and reader, the latter being well aware that Ruth has already become like these matriarchs in her ability to perform an effective bed-trick.[153]

Nevertheless, Ruth stands apart from each of the women to whom she is likened in the threshing floor incident. In every other case, the female characters utilise the devices of a bed-trick to seduce the man in question, engage in illicit sex, and thereby achieve their goal. Ruth follows this trajectory until the last minute, at which she diverges from the normal route. The literary ingenuity is remarkable here: the plot builds to its crescendo as Ruth arrives on the threshing floor, bringing with her the memory of Lot's daughters and Tamar, along with the innuendos and implications that each of their narratives conjure up—the freight of allusion, one might say. The text veritably thrums with tension here, not only due to these associations but also as Boaz and Ruth's interaction is filled with sexual innuendo and possibility. Read at face value, it seems clear that their exchange is ultimately not sexual in nature (not least because, if it were, we would expect to be notified immediately afterwards that Ruth has conceived and will bear a son).[154] Nevertheless, the text brims with suggestive language, both heightening and ultimately overturning readers' expectations as to the nature and trajectory of Ruth and Boaz's relationship.[155]

Interestingly, it would seem that Naomi, who gave Ruth the initial instruction to meet Boaz at

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152. Fischer reads the elders' blessing in 4:11 as (re)defining "the people's genealogy as female" and argues that it is Ruth's courage that leads them to do so, Irmtraud Fischer, “The Book of Ruth: A ‘Feminist’ Commentary to the Torah?,” in *Ruth and Esther*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 33.

153. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 188. The fact that Jacob does not realise which sister he has married until morning suggests some form of cover—either darkness or veil—and possibly his own inebriation as well. These features indicate another bedtrick in the story of Leah and Rachel, though it is Laban who takes the role of trickster in this instance. See Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 98-117, for a close examination of allusions between the stories of Ruth and Naomi and Rachel and Leah and their subversive significance.

154. Ziegler is emphatic about the fact that Ruth and Boaz do not engage in sexual activity at this point, Ziegler, *Ruth*, 269. Jackson, on the other hand, explores the suggestive language of the text and surmises that, although the nature of their physical interaction is never made explicit, the ambiguity around Boaz and Ruth's interlude is intentional and never fully resolved, Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 193-94.

155. See Tooman, *Reading Ruth*, 92-94, Ziegler, *Ruth*, 293-97, and Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 190-94, for a discussion of the euphemistic terms included in Ruth and Boaz's

the threshing floor, did so with the expectation that Ruth would follow the bed-trick through to its completion. Indeed, Naomi's advice to Ruth to meet Boaz in the dark, perfumed and well-dressed, and to solicit his attention by uncovering his feet (an act loaded with sexual overtones), suggests that she envisages a scenario in which Ruth, like Tamar, conceives a son without first identifying herself to Boaz or initiating any kind of formal commitment between them. Thus, not only does Ruth act in a more upstanding way than Lot's daughters and Tamar, but she also goes against her mother-in-law's instructions, choosing instead—at a pivotal moment—to give Boaz instructions rather than listening to and following his commands, as Naomi suggested. With her simple request, "Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin," Ruth communicates her desire to secure a line for Naomi and her sons through a union with Boaz (Ruth 3:9). Their subsequent interaction, in which Boaz commends Ruth's character and spells out the letter of the law by which they must operate, functions as an oddly comical culmination to a scene previously loaded with sexual tension.

Ruth's juxtaposition with these earlier instigators of the bed-trick serves primarily as a means by which to highlight her merit and courage. Unlike Lot's daughters and Tamar—and in opposition to Naomi's instruction—Ruth acts in an unimpeachable fashion, establishing a formal commitment with Boaz and communicating her intentions to him prior to conceiving and bearing a son with him. Of course, the question arises as to the culpability of Lot's daughters and Tamar in turn: given the limitations of each one's situation, their actions could also be read as commendable in their own way. This is particularly true in Tamar's case, in which Judah and his sons knowingly shirk responsibility for the continuation of Er's line and it is Tamar whose actions secure the vital lineage. The necessity of a continued line is also what drives Lot's daughters in their bed-trick, though their supposition that Lot is the only man available with whom to do so is seemingly unsupported in the text itself. Ruth, like these women before her, is both shrewd and courageous in her effort to secure a jeopardised lineage; in her case, however, the narrative goes to great lengths to ensure that she is above reproach at every turn.

There is another layer of significance to these allusions. It is important for the reader to understand that Ruth is ultimately unlike her ancestor Lot and his daughters, and Boaz is unlike his forefather Judah. The allusions drawn to Ruth and Boaz's forebears not only add texture and suspense to the threshing floor scene, but they also underscore the honour of both of these characters. Unlike Judah, who neglects responsibility to his own kin, Boaz operates beyond his own legal obligation to care for Ruth and Naomi. Although all the elements of the bed-trick appear in Ruth's approach to Boaz on the threshing floor, she ultimately diverges from the precedent set by Moabite

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threshing floor encounter.

matriarchs before her and operates with candour rather than trickery. Both the connections and divergences between these stories serve ultimately to drive home a portrayal of a Moabite and an Israelite who act in direct contrast to their forebears in securing a vital lineage that is once more under threat.

3.2.2: Ruth 3 and Genesis 27

It is worth exploring one more poignant intertextual connection that takes place in Ruth's third chapter and emphasises again Ruth's simultaneous resemblance and contrast to matriarchs and patriarchs before her. Amongst a motley crew of tricksters, Jacob emerges as the "most (in)famous";[156] his very name conjures up the trait of deception.[157] Perhaps it is not surprising, then, after Ruth's juxtaposition with trickster matriarchs, that she also serves as a foil for a notoriously wily patriarch. Indeed, while the allusions between the threshing floor scene and the bed-trick narratives are plentiful, the proximity of Ruth's actions to Jacob's in Gen 27 is perhaps even more striking. Here again Ruth's valorous and unimpeachable nature is highlighted by the contrast of her actions with those of an Israelite forbear of renown.

Both of the narratives in question begin in the same way: with the voice of a mother(-in-law) giving instructions for the ruse.[158] Indeed, it is interesting that in both cases it is a maternal figure who conceives of the plan in the first place and sets it in motion. In both cases, the older woman appears to have inside information: in Rebekah's case, she overhears Isaac preparing Esau for his upcoming blessing and giving him instructions, and she in turn seizes the opportunity to replace her husband's intentions with her own. In Naomi's case, the text does not specify how she comes by the information that Boaz will spend the night at the threshing floor. Perhaps it is common knowledge, given that it is the time for barley harvest, or perhaps she has gathered this information from others in the community (the insightful chorus of women in Bethlehem, for instance). This detail is not prioritised by the narrator; rather, the focus here is on the instructions that Naomi gives to her daughter-in-law.

Unsurprisingly, both schemes require the provision and consumption of a meal.[159] This seems to be a key detail in almost every trickster scheme so far; all but Tamar's plan involve eating and/or drinking. In Jacob's case—perhaps due to his identity as trickster supreme—the meal in question

156. Ibid., 41.
157. The root עקב, when used adjectivally, conjures a sense of deception and cunning.
158. Edward Allen Jones, III, "'Who Are You, My Daughter [מי את בתי]?' a Reassessment of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 3," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2014), 660.
159. Ibid..

involves elaborate detail. Isaac instructs Esau to go and kill game and make a stew; apparently, the way to Isaac's heart is directly through his stomach and, more specifically, through the meat that Esau is adept at hunting and preparing. The culinary detail does not end here, though. Rebekah instructs Jacob to go and kill two goats in their prime, and to bring them to her to prepare. The text makes clear that Rebekah knows how to make a meal just the way her husband likes it: twice we are told that Rebekah prepares food in her husband's favourite way (Gen 27:9, 14).

In Jacob's interaction with his father, the meal continues to play an important role. The text captures the moment in which Rebekah sends her son in to see his father, first handing him the meal that she has prepared. Jacob identifies himself as Esau to his father, and immediately requests that his father partake of the meal he has brought. Isaac hesitates, unconvinced of his son's identity, but finally eats the food that his son has brought. In fact, once Isaac accepts the stew, we are provided with the extra detail of the wine that accompanies his meal. As soon as Isaac has partaken of both the food and drink, his inhibitions seem to dwindle. He catches the scent of Esau's clothing (in which Jacob is disguised) and proceeds to bless his younger son.

Clothing, too, is a common motif between the stories. Naomi instructs Ruth to don her finest outfit and to wash and anoint herself in preparation for her interlude with Boaz (Ruth 3:3). Thus both attire and aroma appear as key elements of Naomi's scheme, much like they do in Rebekah's well-crafted plan. Once again, the detail is far more elaborate in Jacob's case: not only does he put on his brother's best clothes (the text here conjures up a splendid ensemble: את בגדי עשׂו בנה הגדל החמדת), but Rebekah also covers her son's arms and neck with goat skins to conceal his soft skin. The added detail that Rebekah happened to have Esau's most lavish outfit in the tent with her is curious—perhaps she had anticipated this moment and was well prepared. Regardless, Jacob enters his father's presence bedecked from head to toe; arguably, without his mother's forward thinking regarding an appropriate wardrobe, the entire plan would have failed.

Jacob is of course helped by another element of cover: darkness.[160] Not the same kind of darkness that conceals Lot's daughters or Ruth, but rather the blindness of his father. Again, this detail is elaborated as Isaac strains to identify the voice of his own son and desperately feels Jacob's hands in an attempt to recognise him. Certainly, without Isaac's lack of sight, Rebekah and Jacob's plot would have been impossible to achieve. If anything, this detail serves to highlight the nature of their deceit: the fact that they take such liberal advantage of Isaac's ailment makes the whole endeavour even more despicable. Alongside its ability to highlight Jacob's deceptive nature, however, Isaac's blindness may also illuminate his own lack of understanding regarding his two sons.

160. Ibid..

Rebekah, clearly, is well aware that it is Jacob who holds claim to God's blessing and his father's inheritance—God himself made this known to her before the boys were born (Gen 25:23). Again, the text is silent here, but whether due to his unwillingness to believe Rebecca's account of God's intention, or his unawareness that God even spoke to her in the first place, Isaac is both literally and figuratively blind to God's plan.

Despite her husband's naiveté, Rebekah is determined to see God's version of her family's future come to fruition, even if this requires some shady tactics. Indeed, at some points in this trickster narrative, Jacob seems to be more of a pawn, moved by his mother's hand to secure victory for them both (perhaps Rebekah gains her own small victory in Jacob's success, given that he is not only God's chosen of the two men, but also her favourite). Twice Rebekah instructs Jacob to "heed" (שמע) her plan, and even invokes on herself any curse that Isaac might hurl at Jacob, should his identity be discovered. Despite Rebekah's apparent grasp on the situation, Jacob is hesitant to follow through with her plot (27:11-12). Ultimately, however, he carries her plan through to completion, adhering to every instruction she gives him.

Conversely, Naomi does not have to entreat Ruth to obey her. Not surprisingly, the daughter-in-law who left her family and her hometown to follow a wretched Naomi back to Bethlehem is willing to hear her mother-in-law's plan. In fact, before Naomi can coerce Ruth to follow through with the scheme, Ruth has voiced her acquiescence: "All that you have said, I will do" (כל אשר תאמרי אעשה, Ruth 3:5). The reader is caught off guard, then, when at the height of her ruse Ruth deviates from Naomi's instruction and takes matters into her own hands. In fact, by the time Ruth has voiced her own plan to Boaz, his consent echoes that of Ruth's to her mother-in-law: "All that you have said, I will do for you" (כל אשר תאמרי אעשה לך, Ruth 3:11). An interesting contrast appears here between Jacob's hesitant obedience and Ruth's confident deviation from Naomi's scheme. At the outset, Ruth appears to operate in a similarly pawn-like fashion; just before Naomi's plan reaches its culmination, however, Ruth seizes control and saves the day, thereby dodging the culpability that haunts Jacob for the rest of his life.[161]

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161. Berlin provides a starkly different reading to this one. She suggests that Ruth fundamentally *misunderstands* Naomi's instruction: Naomi sends Ruth on a "romantic mission" (presumably a sexual one) but Ruth "naively" thinks the aim of her encounter with Boaz is simply to request that he serve as redeemer. When she makes this request, Boaz realises her error but seeks to "cover Ruth's *faux pas*" by commending her actions, Berlin, *Poetics*, 90-91. This interpretation, in my view, requires a counter-reading of the text: at this point in the narrative, it is already well-established that Ruth acts with commendable foresight and agency (e.g. leaving Moab of her own volition and against Naomi's instruction; initiating the act of gleaning to acquire food for them both). The idea that Ruth would unthinkingly (and mistakenly) carry out Naomi's advice at this juncture in the story makes little sense, therefore. Instead, Ruth acts of her own volition in a way that harkens back to her

Despite the key role his mother plays, Jacob is not without fault in the deception of his father. Clearly Jacob enacts every part of the plan himself; it is his voice and touch that ultimately deceives Isaac. Not only this, but Esau sees his downfall as Jacob's fault entirely. Likening this second ruse to Jacob's first deception, which lead to his acquisition of Esau's birthright, Esau ascribes all the guilt to his younger brother (Gen 27:36a):[162]

> Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing.
>
> הכי קרא שׁמו יעקב ויעקבני זה פעמים את בכרתי לקח והנה עתה לקח ברכתי

This sidelining of Rebekah's role is curious, yet it serves to highlight once more Jacob's proclivity for dishonesty. His manipulation in the case of the birthright was entirely his own doing, and serves as an early clue that Jacob will live up to the meaning of his name. Thus, it is hard to see him as innocent in this subsequent deception, despite his brief hesitation. Esau's lament solidifies Jacob's guilt.

Unlike Jacob, Ruth receives two-fold acclaim on the threshing floor. Upon discovering Ruth's presence and hearing her request, Boaz commends her (Ruth 3:10):

> May you be blessed by Yhwh, my daughter. Your latter act of kindness is better than the first, because you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.
>
> ברוכה את ליהוה בתי היטבת חסדך האחרון מן הראשׁון לבלתי לכת אחרי הבחורים אם דל ואם עשׁיר׃

Here Boaz refers back to his previous encounter with Ruth, in which he praised her for leaving her family and her land and returning with her mother-in-law to an unfamiliar people and place. This seems to be the first instance of Ruth's loyalty in Boaz's view, though it does not measure up to the virtue of her second act of loyalty in his estimation. Indeed, the fact that Ruth has chosen to secure a line for Naomi through her kinsman Boaz rather than to pursue her own pleasure by engaging with younger men is even better than her initial decision to follow Naomi back in the first place.

The effect of this doubled commendation is two-fold: not only does it tighten the connections woven between these stories, but it puts Ruth, once again, in stark contrast with Jacob. The thematic overlap between these two narratives is clear at this point: a trickster approaches another after the consumption of a meal, under the cover of darkness, and wearing some form of disguise. The aim, in each case, is to gain a level of security, whether through progeny or blessing. The textual allusion imbedded in Boaz's speech serves as just one more tie between the two scenes. Of course, it also makes Ruth's valour explicit, particularly in contrast with Jacob's notorious duplicity. Once again, Ruth is compared with perhaps the most prominent among patriarchs and still emerges on top,

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initial choice to return with Naomi, a moment in which she substitutes her own plan for Naomi's.

162. My translation of this verse matches that of the NRSV.

morally speaking.

Besides these thematic and structural connections, the two texts are also connected through the cues of common verbiage. The term נכר, meaning either 'recognise' or 'foreigner' is repeated throughout the Ruth narrative and, unsurprisingly, appears in the story of Jacob's deception as well.[163] Occurring four times in two chapters, the theme of recognition and foreignness is prominent in Boaz and Ruth's interactions. Ruth wonders why Boaz would choose to 'recognise' (להכירני) her, despite the fact that she is a 'foreigner' (נכריה); in Ruth 2:19, Naomi blesses the man who has 'recognised' (מכירך) Ruth. And at the tail end of the threshing floor scene, Ruth sneaks away before she can be 'recognised' (יכיר). In Gen 27, we learn that Jacob's disguise has proved successful: Isaac fails to 'recognise' (הכירו) his son despite the disarming clue of his voice, ultimately being convinced by the goat's skin on his hands and the scent of Esau's clothing.

Another clue appears in Boaz's strange reaction to Ruth's presence on the threshing floor. At midnight, rather inexplicably, Boaz 'trembles' (ויחרד) and turns over to find Ruth lying at his feet.[164] Sexual innuendo aside, this seems like a particularly odd detail to include. The cause of Boaz's disturbance and discovery of Ruth remains a mystery; the text is once again gapped on this point. Perhaps this simply serves as an explanation for why Boaz would wake in the first place; the alternative—Boaz calmly slumbering through the night and failing to discover the young Moabite who has come to appeal for his help—would certainly be dissatisfying. Nevertheless, this detail would be largely unnecessary, were it not for the resonating connection it provides back to the story of Isaac and Jacob. Upon discovering Jacob's dishonesty, Isaac is overcome with severe trembling. As is often the case within this narrative of Jacob's deception, the language is almost hyperbolic: Isaac "trembles with an exceedingly great trembling" (ויחרד יצחק חרדה גדלה עד מאד, Gen 27:33) upon Esau's arrival on the scene. This term serves not only as a verbal connection between the two texts, but as a particularly pronounced one, given its odd placement in the narrative.

Upon Jacob's arrival in his presence, Isaac asks the understandable question, "Who are you my son?" (מי אתה בני, Gen 27:18). The query makes sense here: between Isaac's lack of sight and

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163. Jackson notes the occurrence of נכר in both the Ruth and Tamar narratives as yet another detail that draws those two texts together, Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 181.

164. See Jones, "'Who Are You, My Daughter [מי את בתי]?' a Reassessment of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 3," 659-60, and Campbell, *Ruth*, 122. Campbell takes חרד here to indicate Boaz's "response to the unexpected cold," though he notes this as an unusual use of the word. Sasson, on the other hand, suggests that—upon waking to find a female figure close by—Boaz is initially terrified by the possibility that he is visited by Lilith (an ancient mythological demon, whose sexual wiles are a force to be reckoned with). Though certainly an intriguing proposal, Sasson himself acknowledges that it is impossible to adequately substantiate this theory, Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation With a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 74-78.

Jacob's crafty disguise, the answer is not apparent. After Jacob departs with his father's blessing, Esau arrives and Isaac asks the befuddled question, "Who are you?" (מי אתה, Gen 27:32). Again, the question is an understandable one, given the interaction that has just transpired between Isaac and his youngest son. At face value, these questions communicate Isaac's genuine confusion and vulnerability before his wife and son's ruse. And yet they also serve a further purpose: to connect this story, once again, to that of Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor.

The first time this query appears in Ruth 3, it seems fitting. Boaz wakes in the middle of the night to find an unknown figure sleeping at his feet; his surprised utterance, "Who are you?" (מי את, Ruth 3:9) is understandable. Less logical is Naomi's repetition of this question the next morning, when Ruth arrives on her doorstep. Surely her mother-in-law would have expected her return and had no trouble recognising Ruth when she arrived. Nevertheless, Ruth is met with the question once more, "Who are you my daughter?" (מי את בתי, Ruth 3:16).[165] Jones observes that Ruth 3:16 and Gen 27:18 are the only two instances in Hebrew Bible in which מי is followed by a personal pronoun (בני/בתי), further highlighting the connection between these two texts.[166] Supposedly, Naomi could be confused by the darkness (the text specifies that Ruth left before one could recognise another). And yet presumably she expected Ruth to return in the morning after carrying out their plan.[167]

Once again, an unusual feature of the text—in this case a replication that does not entirely fit the context of the Ruth narrative—serves to solidify the connection and contrast between these two stories. The texts are drawn together in this way to highlight their similarities, and—perhaps more importantly—their differences. All of the connections listed above serve to strengthen the

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165. See Jones, "'Who Are You, My Daughter [מי את בתי]?' a Reassessment of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 3," 653-54, for a list of textual variants of the phrase מי את בתי in Ruth 3:16. The only fragment from Qumran to include Ruth 3:16 (Manuscript 2Q17) reads מה את בתי ("what are you, my daughter?"); Peshitta and Targums both reflect the MT (מי את בתי, "who are you, my daughter?").

166. Ibid., 659.

167. Jones notes that scholars have typically explained Naomi's greeting in one of two ways: the majority of interpretations argue that Naomi enquires about Ruth's status rather than her identity (i.e. "were you successful?"). The second (minority) position takes the question at face value and seeks an explanation for its oddity (e.g. Naomi genuinely does not recognise Ruth in the pre-dawn darkness). Jones goes on to argue the latter view, though with a more sinister significance: Naomi inquires as to the identity of the woman at her door because she does not expect Ruth to return from such a dangerous mission. After all, she has sent Ruth well-dressed and perfumed to the very place where, just a few verses prior (and during daylight hours), Boaz finds it necessary to constrain his young men from touching her (2:9), Ibid., 663. Ziegler, *Ruth*, 293-97 and Danna Nolan and Gunn Fewell, David Miller, ed. *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 50, provide similar readings of Naomi's suspicious intentions; Robert L. Hubbard, Jr, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 223 takes the more mainstream view that Naomi has been anxiously awaiting Ruth's return all night.

informative relationship between Jacob and Ruth particularly, bringing their faults and strengths to light. It should come as no surprise at this point that Ruth rises above the heads of those who have gone before her as a paragon of loyalty and valour. Each allusion between Ruth's actions on the threshing floor and the various trickster narratives sets the reader up to expect a particular outcome—generally one that, even if motivated by good intentions, is questionable at best. In true comedic form, Ruth overturns these expectations with her incorruptible character and unflinching commitment to her oath.

3.2.3: Conclusion

Connections with Israel and Moab's forbears create an informative undercurrent to Ruth's story. The frequency with which these allusions appear, along with the poignant moments at which they emerge, both speak to their import for the story as a whole. As already established, the book's third chapter (which functions as the peak of the story's plot) brims with these communicative connections to matriarchs and patriarchs; the elders' blessing at the book's conclusion draws these threads of connection taut. Ruth is compared in turn to matriarchs of Moabite and Israelite lines (Lot's daughters and Rachael and Leah), as well as to Tamar the heroine and Jacob the deceiver. These allusions are not isolated to the second half of the book, however. Ruth's oath at the outset of the story serves as a pivotal moment at which these allusions are conjured and precipitated: it is in the outworking of her promise that Ruth is juxtaposed with the progenitors of Israelite and Moabite people groups. It is pertinent therefore to turn at this point to a thorough analysis of Ruth's oath and the means by which it consolidates and communicates this formative theme.

3.3: The Unique Features of Ruth's Oath

The כה יעשה oath formula appears twelve times throughout the narratives of Hebrew Bible.[168] Ruth's employment of this formula deviates from the usual structure in two key ways: it includes a specific address to Yhwh by use of the divine name and is preceded by a lengthy and poignant prologue. Both of these unique features prove revelatory for the character and story of Ruth and provide valuable interpretive insights when examined closely. Indeed, these unusual elements of the oath play an important role in highlighting the central theme of Ruth's resemblance to and juxtaposition with matriarchs and patriarchs. Given the literary and communicative power of emphatic statements, it is perhaps not surprising that this thread, which is woven throughout Ruth's story, emerges with particular resonance in the words of her oath. What follows is a close reading of

168. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 55.

Ruth's promise with particular attention to its unique elements and their contribution to the whole.

3.3.1: Tetragrammaton

The binding terms of Ruth's oath, which are laid out in the prologue to her promise, provide particular points of connection to Moabite and Israelite progenitors. Before turning to a thorough examination of these points of allusion, however, it is worth acknowledging the significance of Ruth's unusual use of the divine name within the כה יעשה formula. In almost every other case, this oath includes an address to אלהים—a cry to God or gods from the mouths of Israelites and non-Israelites alike.[169] Ruth's oath and Jonathan's in 1 Sam 20:13 are the only exceptions to this rule, and Ruth's address to Yhwh is the only one preserved as such across all translations.[170] While Septuagint replaces יהוה with θεὸς in the case of 1 Samuel 20:13, Ruth's mention of the divine name is preserved as κύριος.[171]

Of course, the most surprising aspect of Ruth's unique address to יהוה is the fact that she is a Moabite and yet she makes her oath by the name of the God of Israel. Despite her non-Israelite heritage, Ruth's oath specifies the deity on whom she calls in a way that is exceptional amongst speakers of the כה יעשה formula. Her devotion to יהוה is later made explicit in Boaz's commendation (Ruth 2:12), which suggests that Ruth is not only aware of Israel's God but is motivated by his protection in her migration to Bethlehem with Naomi. Not only does Ruth fare well when placed alongside Israel's more fallible forebears, but she also demonstrates an awareness of and reliance on Israel's God. The exceptional use of the divine name in her oath at the outset of the narrative identifies Ruth as a character marked by valour and loyalty and acquainted with the God of Israel.

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169. The כה יעשה formula is spoken by Jezebel (1 Kngs 19:2) and Ben-hadad (1 Kngs 20:10), both of whom are Gentiles and address their oath to "the gods" (plurality is indicated by the verb used in conjunction with אלהים).

170. Ziegler compares the oaths of Jonathan and Ruth, suggesting that their exceptional use of the divine name may stem from the fact that they solidify "incongruous" bonds: Jonathan with David, who will usurp the former's right to the throne, and Ruth with Naomi, who has little to offer her in the way of family or fortune. It is due, Zeigler posits, to the unlikely nature of these unions that Jonathan and Ruth find it necessary to bolster their statements with a mention of the divine name. Lest David or Naomi question the motivation or reliability of their promises, both Jonathan and Ruth underline their determination in terms (or, more specifically, with a title) that cannot be questioned, Ziegler, *Ruth*, 163-64. See also Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 76-79, for a thorough comparison of these two texts. Campbell reads Ruth's use of the divine name here as a sign of her conversion, Campbell, *Ruth*, 75.

171. See Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 76-79, for a detailed discussion of textual variants.

3.3.2: Lengthy Prologue

In most cases the כה יעשה formula appears rather abruptly and with little to no introduction. Often arising in a moment of tension or ardour, the oath is frequently spoken in haste or without premeditation. A few examples are helpful here: in 1 Samuel 14:44 Saul makes an oath against the life of his own son in a desperate attempt to demonstrate power:

> Saul said, "Thus and more shall Yhwh do; you shall surely die, Jonathan!"
>
> ויאמר שׁאול כה יעשׂה אלהים וכה יוסף כי מות תמות יונתן׃

In a similarly terse expression of rage, Jezebel speaks an oath against Elijah in 1 Kngs 19:2 and likens him to the dead prophets of Baal:

> Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "Thus may the gods do to me and more if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like the life of one of them."
>
> ותשׁלח איזבל מלאך אל אליהו לאמר כה יעשׂון אלהים וכה יוספון כי כעת מחר אשׂים את נפשׁך כנפשׁ אחד מהם׃

The brevity of these examples is characteristic of every כה יעשה oath in Hebrew Bible except two: Ruth's oath and Abner's in 2 Samuel 3:9. In contrast to every other pronouncement of this oath, these two are prefaced by a description of (in Ruth's case) and an explanation for (in Abner's) their respective promises. Interestingly, the prologue to Abner's oath expresses exactly the opposite sentiment to Ruth's: in contrast to Ruth's pledge of unflinching loyalty, Abner's oath expresses the ruptured relationship between himself and Saul. It is worth quoting Ish-bosheth's accusation against Abner in order to set the context for the latter's response (2 Sam 3:7-10):

> Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah daughter of Aiah. And [Ish-bosheth] said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?" The words of Ish-bosheth made Abner very angry; he said, "Am I a dog's head for Judah? Today I keep showing loyalty to the house of your father Saul, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not betrayed you into the hand of David; and yet you charge me now with a crime concerning this woman. So may God do to Abner and so may he add to it if I do not do for David all that Yhwh swore to him—to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul, and set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba."
>
> ולשׁאול פלגשׁ ושׁמה רצפה בת איה ויאמר אל אבנר מדוע באתה אל פילגשׁ אבי׃ ויחר לאבנר מאד על דברי אישׁ בשׁת ויאמר הראשׁ כלב אנכי אשׁר ליהודה היום אעשׂה חסד עם בית שׁאול אביך אל אחיו ואל מרעהו ולא המציתך ביד דוד ותפקד עלי עון האשׁה היום׃ כה יעשׂה אלהים לאבנר וכה יסיף לו כי כאשׁר נשׁבע יהוה לדוד כי כן אעשׂה לו׃ להעביר הממלכה מבית שׁאול ולהקים את כסא דוד על ישׂראל ועל יהודה מדן ועד באר שׁבע׃

With the prologue to his oath Abner describes in detail his previous loyalty to Saul as a justification for his subsequent desertion and allegiance with David. Abner's description of his fidelity to Saul's brothers and friends echoes Ruth's promise to make Naomi's people her own, and yet the two oaths could not be more divergent in purpose and tone. Where Abner explains his

defection from Saul's services, Ruth binds herself to Naomi until death. Set alongside Abner's oath, the devotion of Ruth's pledge is striking (Ruth 1:16-17):

> Do not entreat me to leave you, to turn from following you, because where you go I will go, and where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yhwh do thus to me and more if even death parts me from you!
>
> אל תפגעי בי לעזבך לשוב מאחריך כי אל אשר תלכי אלך ובאשר תליני אלין עמך עמי ואלהיך אלהי:
> באשר תמותי אמות ושם אקבר כה יעשה יהוה לי וכה יסיף כי המות יפריד ביני וביניך:

Not surprisingly, the weighty language of Ruth's preamble reveals a great deal about her character. Not only does the lengthy prologue communicate Ruth's selfless fidelity at the outset of the story, but it conjures connections to Moabite and Israelite patriarchs whose legacy she surpasses in the fulfilment of her promise.

The book of Ruth begins in Moab, Israel's sister-nation with a troubled past. The knowing reader, upon encountering this setting, is immediately reminded of Lot: the patriarch with a rather sordid history. If this troubled setting does not pique the reader's interest enough, the next scene, in which a Moabite (Lot's descendant) sets out to follow an Israelite to the Promised Land and is met with resistance, should certainly draw attention. Indeed, the familiar scene of Lot poised to follow Abram is conjured up here.[172] Much like Naomi does with her daughter-in-law, Abram insists that their circumstances will improve if Lot goes his own way, more specifically: in the opposite direction. Similarly, Naomi implores Ruth to depart from following her and to return to her own people and hometown. In the Genesis narrative, Lot gleefully takes his uncle's suggestion and chooses the best land for himself, effectively leaving his uncle high and dry. The results are dire—Lot cohabits with a particularly wayward people group, who end up exhausting God's patience and inviting his punishment in the form of brimstone from heaven. Lot's line consequently shuffles off-stage in shame, and is relegated to the sidelines from that point until the book of Ruth.

In contrast to her forefather, Ruth refuses Naomi's pleas that she separate and return to Moab. Instead, Ruth clings to Naomi and makes an impassioned oath never to leave her side. The juxtaposition of these two texts is strengthened by verbal overlap: Ziegler has noted that Abram's request and Ruth's pledge share similar language.[173] In Gen 13:9, Abram prefers Lot to separate (הפרד) from him, while in Ruth 1:17, Ruth swears that not even death will separate her from Naomi (יפריד).[174] Though the reader might not know the outcome of Ruth's story yet, the fact that its

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172. Ellen Van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi: Two Aliens,* trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1997), 134.
173. Ziegler, *Ruth*, 71.
174. Tooman, *Reading Ruth*, 100-01.

beginning differs so drastically from her forefather's conjures up a sense of hope at the outset.

Not only does Ruth's choice differ significantly from Lot's, but her monologue in dedication to Naomi is interesting in comparison with Abram's speech to Lot. Up until this point, the juxtaposition of these two texts suggests that Ruth's actions are to be seen in contrast with Lot's, while—by extension—Naomi is Abram-like. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that these narratives inform each other in more ways than one: not only is Ruth cut from different cloth than her ancestor Lot, but the terms of her oath (laid out in the lengthy prologue) distinguish Ruth as the Abram-like figure. As we shall see, the comparison between Ruth and Abram speaks volumes to who Ruth is as a character and reappears elsewhere in the book, in Boaz's commendation of the Moabite widow. In the context of the prologue to Ruth's oath, two connections to the character of Abram appear. To begin with, the terms established by Abram in his dismissal of Lot, though divergent in meaning, are similar in form to the terms of Ruth's oath. Secondly, in the prologue of her oath Ruth outlines the means by which she intends to bind herself to Naomi (i.e., leaving her country and kin and accompanying Naomi to a foreign land). Both here and in Boaz's later praise of Ruth, her character is mirrored on the esteemed patriarch Abram, who leaves all to follow God's leading into the land promised to his progeny.

A brief explanation of the connections between Ruth and Abram's speeches will suffice. In no uncertain terms, Abram entreats Lot to leave his company (Gen 13:9):

> Is not the whole land before you? Depart from following after me: if you go to the left, I will take the right; if you go to the right, I will take the left.
>
> הלא כל הארץ לפניך הפרד נא מעלי אם השׂמאל ואימנה ואם הימין ואשׂמאילה׃

Abram's petition is emphatic and detailed: he communicates the importance of Lot's departure, and the means by which it should take place (i.e., not only should they go their separate ways, but they should in fact move in opposite directions). Ruth's oath is similarly dramatic and specific. The determination and emotion in her speech are palpable: just as Abram sees it as essential that his nephew leaves him, Ruth will not contemplate the possibility of being parted from her mother-in-law. Not only is her resolve clear, but the means by which she plans to enact it are also specified in her speech—in fact, the terms of her commitment are elaborated in even more detail than in Abram's speech to his nephew. In contrast to Abram's description of the distance that must come between himself and Lot, Ruth promises not to depart from Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17a):

> But Ruth said, "Do not entreat me to leave you, to turn from following you, because where you go I will go, and where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."
>
> ותאמר רות אל תפגעי בי לעזבך לשׁוב מאחריך כי אל אשׁר תלכי אלך ובאשׁר תליני אלין עמך עמי ואלהיך אלהי׃ באשׁר תמותי אמות ושׁם אקבר

Though the statements of Abram and Ruth diverge in meaning, they are akin in nature. Abram entreats Lot in strong and specific terms to leave his company, while Ruth uses equally firm and exact language to communicate her determination to remain in Naomi's presence.[175] Perhaps to further highlight Ruth's departure from her ancestor's trajectory, Ruth the Moabite is likened instead to the Israelite patriarch Abram.[176]

While the similarity between their speeches is notable, it is the congruence between Abram's obedience to God and Ruth's subsequent actions that is most significant. Scholars have recognised a link between the defining moment in which Abram is called out of his country and his clan and Ruth's choice to leave all that is familiar in favour of following Naomi home.[177] In Gen 12:1, God instructs Abram to turn his back on all that has defined him up to this point—his people and place—and to step into a new identity, one that is shaped by a covenant relationship with God and the promise of land and lineage beyond his wildest imaginings. This moment is certainly a key one in the trajectory of Hebrew Bible as a whole, with its identification of Abram's descendants as God's chosen people. From here the narrative of the pentateuch unfolds, and it is this covenant bond that the prophets mourn and the writings seek to uphold. In short, this early call for Abram to leave all that is familiar and follow God's leading is foundational to all that follows after.

It is certainly significant, then, that these very words spoken by God to Abram are echoed both in the terms set out in the prologue to Ruth's oath, and in Boaz's accolade of the young woman gleaning in his field. Through the mouth of Boaz, Ruth the Moabite is likened to the Israelite patriarch Abram in her choice to forsake her people and place in favour of clinging to God's people and their land. Boaz indicates that the virtue of Ruth's decision is well known (Ruth 2:11):

> And Boaz answered, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has indeed been reported to me: you left your father and mother and the land of your kindred and you went to a people whom you did not know before."

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175. See Matthew Michael, "The Art of Persuasion and the Book of Ruth: Literary Devices in the Persuasive Speeches of Ruth 1:6-18," *Hebrew Studies* 56 (2015), 158, on the persuasive power of Ruth's oath.

176. Berger notes another point of allusion between the stories of Ruth and Abram: following Ruth's oath, the two women depart for Bethlehem (ותלכנה שתיהם); in Gen 22, Abraham and Isaac make their way towards Moriah together (וילכו שניהם יחדו). Berger argues convincingly for the significance of this allusion for the characterisation of Ruth, Yitzhak Berger, "Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (2009), 255-56.

177. D. F. Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89, no. 1 (1970), 32; Yair Zakovitch, "Through the Looking Glass: Reflections/inversions of Genesis Stories in the Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (1993), 147; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 59; Tooman, *Reading Ruth*, 66.

ויען בעז ויאמר להּ הגד הגד לי כל אשׁר עשׂית את חמותך אחרי מות אישׁך ותעזבי אביך ואמך וארץ מולדתך ותלכי אל עם אשׁר לא ידעת תמול שׁלשׁום׃

The verbal and thematic overlap between Boaz's commendation of Ruth and God's instruction to Abram are readily apparent (Gen 12:1):

> Now Yhwh said to Abram, “Go from your land and your kindred and the house of your father to the land that I will show you."

ויאמר יהוה אל אברם לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשׁר אראך׃

Ruth leaves behind her father (אביך) and her mother, just as Abram forsakes "the house of this father" (ומבית אביך); both parties depart from their kindred (מולדתך) and from their land (מארצך). While the specific verbiage is different on this point, it is clear that both characters are unfamiliar with the land to which they travel: Boaz makes this explicit in the case of Ruth, while God promises that he will reveal Abram's destination in due time. Both characters' actions are also initiated on the presupposition that Yhwh will provide protection and blessing in their sojourning. Abram only leaves his homeland in the first place because God instructs him to and promises to establish his name and his offspring as a result. If Ruth is similarly directed by God at the outset, the text does not make this explicit; however, Boaz acknowledges that Ruth was at least mindful of Israel's God ("under whose wings you have come for refuge," Ruth 2:12) when she chose to follow Naomi.

Commentators have noted the weighty connection between Ruth and Abram and sought to explain it in various ways. Ziegler sees Ruth as a pivotal figure who brings a wayward Moabite nation full-circle, back to their righteous heritage. Tracing Ruth's roots back to Lot, Ziegler follows the trajectory of this infamous patriarch after his separation from Abram. In Ziegler's view, there are two predominantly defining traits of God's people (and, more specifically, Abram): "proper social interactions" or *hesed*, and "sexual morality."[178] Upon his fateful move to Sodom, Ziegler argues, Lot gradually loses these characteristics and, therefore, his affiliation with God's chosen people. This deviance is only heightened in the choices of his ancestors until, ultimately, the people of Israel are given formal instructions not to cohabit with their Moabite and Ammonite cousins, lest they too be swayed from the Abrahamic ideal of kindness and sexual purity (Deut 23:3).

In Ziegler's view, Ruth's decision to realign herself with God's people provides a positive resolution to her nation's tainted past. The fact that she, like Abram, leaves all that is familiar in favour of the people of Israel and their God ties up the loose ends of Lot's eager departure from his favoured uncle, Moab's questionable origin story, and the nation's sinful repertoire. The ruptured relationship between kinsmen (Abram and Lot) is healed by Ruth's dedication to Naomi and the preservation of her family line, even against all odds. In other words, Lot leaves Abram and heads in

178. Ziegler, *Ruth*, 63-64.

the opposite direction, towards what appears to be a more favourable future, and ultimately he and his progeny suffer the cost. In contrast, Ruth clings to Naomi despite her mother-in-law's repeated assurances that there is nothing good waiting for either of them in Bethlehem, and her loyalty leads Ruth to be an esteemed member of an Israelite community and the great-grandmother of King David himself.

This reading is not without its flaws. While Abram's role as forefather and covenant-bearer for the Israelite people is certainly a meaningful one, he too falls short of the ideals outlined by Ziegler. Indeed, Abram's repeated jeopardisation of his own marital fidelity, to say nothing of the well-being of his hosts, is evident in two sister-wife stories in which Abram instructs his wife, Sarai, to identify herself as his sister (Gen 12, 20). In both cases, Abram's sexual morality as well as his sense of social responsibility is brought into question. In Egypt and Gerar, Sarai is taken from Abram's household and brought to the ruler of that place without protest from her husband. Indeed, Abram is quite clear that it is his own safety that concerns him, and he seems willing to sacrifice his wife entirely for this cause (Gen 12:11-13). In both cases, his deceit brings trouble on the nation in which he sojourns; in fact, God reprimands Abram on both occasions through the mouth of a foreign leader. Thus Abram's own sexual and social morality are called into question by his lack of loyalty to Sarai and his failure to care for the people around him. The fact that he repeats this cruel ruse twice only serves to further highlight his fallibility.

In addition, Abram's choice to ignore the terms of God's promised blessing and attempt to establish a line through Hagar, rather than Sarai, is riddled with sexual and social implications. Not only does this compromise (once again) Abram's fidelity to Sarai, but it creates a rift in his family. Ultimately, Abram has no choice but to forsake all bonds with Hagar and his son, Ishmael, in order to preserve God's promised blessing, which he has once again put at risk. Needless to say, Abram does not measure up to the standards of sexual and social morality that Ziegler attributes to him. Indeed, both Lot and Abram's descendants fall short of this ideal: the book of Judges makes clear that the people of Israel, too, have deviated from any sense of moral code. Ziegler acknowledges this, but views Boaz rather than Ruth as the primary means by which the Israelite people are returned to this original moral compass.[179]

It is intriguing, however, that Ruth the Moabite is arguably portrayed with no flaws whatsoever. Boaz, too, conducts himself with complete integrity, and yet it is Ruth who drives the plot along with her initiative—first, to return with her mother-in-law; second, to glean (in Boaz's field); and, finally, with her proposal to Boaz. Ultimately, it is through Ruth that hope is reborn for

179. Ibid., 45-48.

the people of Israel in the form of Obed, David's grandfather. As Yair Zakovitch observes,

> The inverted comparison between Ruth and Abraham testifies that this Moabite woman, who knows no selfishness, who leaves her country out of commitment to her mother-in-law with no hope to become a mother herself, is a more noble figure than the nation's father, Abraham.[180]

Ruth outshines her short-sighted forefather, Lot, and demonstrates a more consistent fidelity than Israel's most famous patriarch, Abram. The distinction of Ruth's character is exemplified in her interaction with Boaz on the threshing floor at the book's climax, and yet it is demonstrated first and perhaps most powerfully in the preface to her oath. The prologue to her promise is exceptional not only for its length but also for the dramatic terms of selfless loyalty which, when fulfilled, set Ruth apart from the hero(in)es whose stories are echoed throughout the book.

3.3.3: Conclusion

Ruth's oath does considerable work for the text here, at once shedding light on the characters of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi, while providing retrospective insight on Lot and Abram as well. At the outset of the narrative Ruth's promise introduces her as an exemplary character in specific terms: a Moabite who is acquainted with and loyal to יהוה, Ruth is also distinguished from her forefather, Lot, and juxtaposed with Abram. The rest of the narrative plays out these dimensions to Ruth's character by comparing her in turn with Lot's daughters and Tamar. The terms of her oath function, therefore, as a central point from which the theme of Ruth's connection and contrast with Moabite and Israelite forbears is catalysed and continued.

3.4: Conclusion

Through the fulfilment of her oath and simultaneous juxtaposition with matriarchs and patriarchs, Ruth emerges as the central character—the heroine—of this story. The outworking of her oath provides ample opportunity for her to be read (and compared) alongside characters from other stories and her own; at every turn Ruth emerges as an exemplar. This is true not only with regard to the well-known stories of Abram, Lot, Tamar, and Jacob, but also to the characters with whom she rubs shoulders: Naomi, Orpah, and Boaz. The ends to which Ruth binds herself in her oath to Naomi and her faithfulness in fulfilling the terms of her promise reveal her to be a paragon of loyalty and courage, unmatched amongst Israelite progenitors and her Bethlehemite counterparts.

Ruth's oath reveals facets of her fellow characters' dispositions—for instance, alongside Ruth's loyalty, Naomi does not fare as well. She seems caught up in her own misery, bemoaning

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180. Zakovitch, “Through the Looking Glass,” 147.

God's lack of generosity and (in moribund tones) requesting a change of name: rather than Naomi ('pleasantness'), she asks to be called Mara ('bitterness') to signify that God has treated her poorly (Ruth 1:20).[181] Perhaps even more notably, though she returns with a daughter-in-law who—just three verses prior—has given up everything to accompany her, Naomi still claims to have returned "empty" (ריקם) from her sojourning (Ruth 1:21). Later, when she instructs Ruth to approach Boaz on the threshing floor, Naomi hardly seems to have her daughter-in-law's best interests in mind. Rather, she sends Ruth unattended in the middle of the night, dressed and perfumed, to entreat a man for help. There is no indication as to why the request needs to be made under these circumstances—presumably Ruth or Naomi could have approached Boaz in the daylight, as he later approaches the closer kinsman to negotiate a plan regarding Ruth and Naomi's future. Thus it would seem that Naomi knowingly puts Ruth in a compromising situation, presumably with the hope that she will conceive by Boaz and bear a son (albeit illegitimate) to continue Elimelech's line. When considered in light of Ruth's selflessness, Naomi's actions appear to be motivated instead by self-pity and cowardice.

Boaz is certainly a positive character in the story, and yet his lack of agency relative to Ruth is notable. Ruth sets the plot in motion with her oath and initiates key moments throughout the rest of the story's progression (it is only because of Ruth's decision to glean behind the harvesters that she meets Boaz in the first place, and her savvy response on the threshing floor ultimately saves the day). Boaz, in contrast, seems to follow behind Ruth in a daze of attentive admiration. Presumably Boaz himself could have initiated marriage to Ruth and the fulfilment of levirate law (or some version thereof) with regards to Naomi and her husband's line and yet it is Ruth who arrives on the threshing floor with a proposal.[182] True, Naomi sets the plan in motion by sending Ruth to the threshing floor, but it is thanks to Ruth's own management of the situation that the story ends on a comically picturesque note, rather than with the somewhat questionable success of a story like Tamar's, for instance. Of course, Boaz's virtue as a prominent and upstanding character in this story should not be overlooked; for a start, he recognises and commends Ruth's loyalty and kindness from the beginning,

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181. It is interesting to note that this request is never granted—throughout the rest of the narrative she continues to be referred to as Naomi, as though neither the narrator nor her fellow characters are fully persuaded by the necessity of her request. See Bal, *Lethal Love*, 74, on the significance of names and naming in the book of Ruth and the preservation of Naomi's name throughout the narrative.

182. As has been noted elsewhere, the relationship between Ruth and Boaz does not actually fulfill the specific law given in regards to levirate marriage in Deut 25:5. Nevertheless, there is considerable overlap between the language used in Deut 25:5-10 and that used to describe Boaz's role throughout the book of Ruth. See Ziegler, *Ruth*, 395-403, for a detailed discussion of these connections and their significance.

while Naomi is quick to overlook it. Not only this, but he extends kindness to Ruth at every turn, and, in the final chapter, it is Boaz who finalises arrangements with Naomi's nearer kinsman. Nevertheless, even in his kindness, Boaz seems to follow in Ruth's footsteps; it is Ruth who sets this precedent with her selfless pledge at the outset of the story.

Ruth's repute—both in the setting of Bethlehem and against the backdrop of Israel and Moab's origin stories—is well summed up by the chorus of Bethlehemite women at the narrative's conclusion. In a book that prioritises female voices and casts a Moabite widow as heroine, it is only fitting that the story is framed by two speeches from the mouths of a female chorus. At the outset of the story, the women of the town are "astir" (ותהם) upon Naomi's return from Moab and ask in disbelief, "Is this Naomi?" (הזאת נעמי, Ruth 1:19). This scene, according to Bertman, mirrors and provides a "counterbalance" to the chorus' exuberant speech at the book's conclusion.[183] The dismal nature of Naomi's return to Bethlehem, bereft of husband and sons, is happily resolved in the end as the chorus rejoices over her (grand)son Obed and her faithful daughter-in-law, Ruth. Indeed, the Bethlehemite womens' estimation of Ruth is clear and profound: "she is more to you than seven sons" (אשר היא טובה לך משבעה בנים, Ruth 4:15).[184] In her despondency at the beginning of the narrative, Naomi speaks to these very women and claims that God has emptied her out; in doing so, she overlooks the daughter-in-law who has just bound herself to Naomi by an oath of devotion. At the conclusion of the narrative, the insightful chorus sets Naomi straight: though she now celebrates the provision of a male child, the source of her fulness and blessing has been with her all along, in the form of a daughter-in-law who is worth more to her than any male heir.

Arguably, the culmination of this story is not the birth of Obed but—more broadly—the consummation of Ruth's oath. After all, Ruth is "more…than seven sons" because of the selfless devotion expressed in her oath and the courage and honesty with which she follows through on her promise. As a stimulus for plot movement at the story's beginning, Ruth's oath cues the theme of her distinction amongst patriarchs and matriarchs and highlights her pursuit of Israel's God. It is the outworking and fulfilment of these leitmotifs that provide the stuff of a story for the book of Ruth:

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183. Bertman, “Symmetrical Design,” 165. See also Michael S. Moore, “Ruth the Moabite and the Blessing of Foreigners,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (1998), 210-12, on the significance of the chorus' blessing.

184. Trible notes that this blessing centres around Ruth, rather than the son she has produced, and exalts her above the "ideal number of natural sons." She goes on to observe, "These words of the women converge upon Naomi, and the storyteller reports that then she takes the child, holds him close, and becomes his guardian. The woman of emptiness has become the woman of plenty. And Ruth, the daughter-in-law faithful beyond death, is the mediator of this transformation to life," Phyllis Trible, “Two Women in a Man’s World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 59, no. 3 (1976), 277.

the rise and fall of plot and the definition of each character (and Ruth in particular) is tethered back to the pivotal moment of her promise. The book concludes on a happy note because each theme is ultimately woven into the picturesque fulfilment of Ruth's oath.

Abigail: Femme Among Fools

Now, my lord, as Yhwh lives, and as you live—Yhwh who has kept you from shedding blood and your hand from taking vengeance—may your enemies and those who seek evil against my lord be like Nabal.

ועתה אדני חי יהוה וחי נפשׁך אשׁר מנעך יהוה מבוא בדמים והושׁע ידך לך ועתה יהיו כנבל איביך והמבקשׁים אל אדני רעה׃

4.1: Introduction

Oaths proliferate throughout the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, enhancing the drama that already reverberates throughout the narratives of Israel's early monarchy. The chapters selected as a case study here prove no exception: between chapters 24 and 26 of 1 Samuel, eight oaths occur—each one illuminating important facets of the speaker's disposition. When considered in concert with one another, the oaths of 1 Sam 24-26 also provide valuable insight in to the characteristics required of a successful Israelite monarch. At the heart of this three-chapter pericope, Abigail emerges—seemingly out of nowhere—as a voice of reason, a leader of leaders, and a perceptive guide to David, who ultimately keeps him from blotting his copybook as Yhwh's chosen king. The nuances of Abigail's oath highlight a central theme of chapters 24-26 and, indeed, of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel as a whole: the weighty implications of a leader's (mis)use of power.

The character of Abigail is a much-debated subject amongst commentators. Berger is particularly scathing, presenting her as "a scheming accomplice" to David, with whose help she successfully disposes of a bothersome husband.[185] Miscall hints at the fact that Abigail intentionally discloses her actions to Nabal in a moment when the news is most likely to do him harm ("when silence would be in her husband's best interest").[186] In his exploration of comedy in 1 Sam 25, Garsiel is dismissive at best: "That a woman outmanoeuvres men lends the story a humorously entertaining touch."[187] In contrast, Fokkelman views the timing of Abigail's arrival on the scene (immediately following the news of Samuel's death, 1 Sam 25:1a) as indicative of her crucial role as

185. Berger, “Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25,” 269.

186. Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 154.

187. Moshe Garsiel, “Wit, Words, and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25,” (Sheffield: 1990), 163. See Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 248, for a discussion on the complex implications of feminist criticism of comedic texts in Hebrew Bible: "In its subverting mode, comedy champions women who best men, thus making fools of those men. In its preserving mode, comedy makes fools of men by allowing them to be bested by women."

a guide to the future king, particularly with regard to his use of power.[188] Klein views Abigail as one among "the chorus of those prophesying David's kingship (Samuel, Jonathan, Saul)," a reading which aligns with earlier interpretations that place Abigail among seven female prophets in Hebrew Bible.[189] Not surprisingly, Abigail's oath does a great deal to clarify her role and contribution, as well as that of the characters with whom she is juxtaposed (Nabal, David, and Saul).

The book of 1 Samuel portrays the ebb and flow of Israelite leadership and ultimately identifies David as a paradigmatic monarch for the nation of Israel. At the outset, the leadership of Eli the priest is already failing: a flabby and fallible character, he turns a blind eye to his sons' misbehaviour and provides little direction for Israel. In his stead, Samuel is attentive to Yhwh's voice and leads the people well, but his sons are as wayward as Eli's and provide little hope of long-term leadership. Saul is appointed as Israel's first king; though his physique commands respect (1 Sam 9:2), his leadership inspires little confidence. Thus the plot of 1 Samuel is driven along by the need for leadership in Israel: specifically—by the people's request—a monarchy to take the place of the fickle oversight of judges and priests. At the outset of 1 Samuel, Hannah's song provides a definition for the kind of leadership that is needed in Israel: an authority that defers to Yhwh's ultimate power to raise up and bring low as he chooses (1 Sam 2:1-10).

The question of power and how it is employed is a pervasive theme throughout the narratives of Israelite monarchy. For instance, Saul's tragic decision to take matters into his own hands and kill Yhwh's priests at Nob serves as a blight on his career from that point onwards (1 Sam 22). Ahimelech and his cohort of priests are slaughtered despite their innocence and as a result of Saul's desperate attempt to secure his position and power as Israel's king. Later, David's encounter with Nabal brings him to the brink of annihilating an innocent Israelite community (which cues Saul's earlier misuse of power).[190] Abigail's quick intervention and perspicuous speech divert David from his intended course and prevent him (for the time being) from shedding innocent blood (1 Sam 25). Not surprisingly, at the centre of Abigail's address is an oath, the nuances of which highlight Yhwh's role in preventing David from misusing his power.

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188. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates (1 Sam. 13-31 & 2 Sam. 1)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 473.

189. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 251. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli* (Tucson: Toby Press, 2014), 14a, lists Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther as the seven prophetesses of Hebrew Bible.

190. See Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 211, and Garsiel, *David and His Kingdom*, 171. Garsiel points out that David's tumultuous encounter with Nabal is mirrored in 2 Sam 10:1-14, when the king of Ammon mistreats David's delegates.

Abigail's oath serves as a pivotal moment in David's career and the narrative of 1 Samuel as a whole. David's oaths, which take place before and after Abigail's, epitomise the development of his own relationship to power and are influenced by Abigail's timely intervention. Beginning with a brief analysis of the mirrored plot of chapters 24-26 and the weight of Abigail's speech at its centre, this chapter goes on to analyse the oaths that punctuate this pericope. Each of David's oaths are considered in turn as expressions of David's understanding and use of power, which is interrupted and deeply influenced by Abigail's oath. The unique elements of Abigail's pledge prove to be a revelatory reminder of the importance of the just employment of power on the part of Israel's leadership. Finally, the effect of oaths on characterisation is considered in conjunction with the comedic tone that pervades throughout these three narrative interludes.

4.2: A Mirrored Plot: 1 Samuel 24-26

The narratives of 1 Sam 24-26 revolve around one central question, which is conveniently posed by Saul at the outset (24:20): "If a man meets his enemy, does he let him go his way unharmed?"[191] Addressing this question, the plot lines of chapters 24 and 26 mirror one another and provide a framework within which chapter 25 takes a central and pivotal position.[192] In chapters 24 and 26 Saul is threatened by David's popularity and pursues him as an enemy with the intention of finding and eliminating a threat to his own power. In both chapters (in which the same plot line is repeated for emphatic and comedic value), Saul fails to find David; instead, David and his men happen upon Saul and (twice) David sends his enemy away without harm.[193] Juxtaposed with these repeated demonstrations of restraint is David's hotheaded response to Nabal in chapter 25: a compromising situation from which David is narrowly saved by Abigail's wisdom and courage.[194]

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191. My translation of this verse matches that found in JPS. Garsiel provides a similar reading of this pericope, highlighting "the relation of a man in authority to other people or to his foes" as a definitive theme, Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 122-23. See also Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 150, 156. Polzin, on the other hand, offers a different driving question for this narrative pericope and its surrounding context: "What is to be done with Saul now that God has rejected him? Assuming that David will not kill Saul, how then will he die?" Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 212.

192. See Garsiel, *David and His Kingdom*, 170, Klein, *1 Samuel*, 246, and Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 144.

193. Polzin notes the echoes between Saul's refusal to kill Agag (1 Sam 15) and David's determination to spare Saul's life (1 Sam 24, 26). The former is condemned, in his view, because Saul is motivated by the voice of the people (15:24), while David's forbearance is "apparently divinely inspired," Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 209-10.

194. Chapman describes 1 Sam 24, 25, and 26 as "a kind of literary triptych, with each chapter providing a distinct panel in what is ultimately a single tableau," Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 193. Along similar lines, Bosworth identifies 1 Sam 25 as a *mise-en-abyme*—a scene within a larger story that acts as a "microcosm" of the themes played out in the broader context. David's encounter with Nabal and Abigail, Bosworth argues, is a duplication of "the Story of David

The comedic nature of these stories serves to exaggerate, and thereby draw attention to, each character's response to power. When Saul embarks in both chapters 24 and 26 to pursue David, it is the impotency of his rule and inconstancy of his feelings that are ultimately brought to the fore.[195] In each case, Saul finds himself in a vulnerable and humiliating state before David (either relieving himself in a cave full of David's men or fast asleep and unprotected by his army). On both occasions, David is urged by his men to seize the opportunity to do away with their enemy; instead, David repeatedly swears an oath to preserve Saul's life and entrusts his fate and the enactment of justice into the hands of Yhwh. These confrontations between Saul and David draw attention to each character's response to power: Saul exercises his authority as king to summon an army and pursue an innocent outlaw; ultimately, he is twice exposed in an entirely powerless position before David. In contrast, David is unexpectedly given the upper hand against his enemy on two occasions, but despite the fact that he could easily and even justifiably taken Saul's life, David demonstrates restraint and credits Yhwh with ultimate power over the just and the unjust.

Situated between these two stories of restraint, chapter 25 continues the comedic tone but reverses the roles. Suddenly, David takes Saul's place as the wielder of discriminatory power and Nabal and his innocent men become the victims. Granted, a direct parallel between David-the-hero and Nabal-the-fool cannot be made; while David's loyalty to Saul remains unflinching, it is Nabal's boorish and unprovoked refusal to help David that instigates their conflict in the first place.[196] Nevertheless, in a series of narratives that revolve around the (ab)use of power, it is certainly significant that David's role shifts from pursued to pursuer, and that his authority is suddenly marked by instability and a desire for vengeance. In order to accentuate this unlikely connection between

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and the House of Saul." This connection is made concrete in the repetition of Saul's confession ("you did good for me and I repaid you with harm," 24:18) in David's accusation against Nabal ("he has returned me harm for good," 25:21), David A. Bosworth, *The Story Within a Story in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Washington DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2008), 1-2, 70-117.

195. Miscall notes, "At this point in the story, we can say that Saul's career has been marked by seeking and not finding or by seeking one thing and finding another," Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 144. When Saul is first introduced, he is scouring the territory of Benjamin in an attempt to find his father's wandering donkeys; from this point in the narrative onwards, he is often portrayed in futile pursuit (see for example 1 Sam 9:3-4; 14:16, 37-43; 16:17; 17:55; 24; 26).

196. The comedic significance of Nabal's name is an oft-noted feature of this story. The name Nabal (נבל) not only conjures up a 'fool' (this connotation is made explicit in 25:25), but is also picked up as a pun throughout the narrative. Abigail offers two jars of wine (נבלי–יין) to David and his men; at the story's conclusion, the villain's heart (לבן, an *atbash* of נבל) dies within him. Commentators also note that נבל is the reverse of לבן and argue for thematic connections between the two characters. See Garsiel, *David and His Kingdom*, 176; Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 127; Klein, *1 Samuel*, 249; Jon D. Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1978), 13-14; Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 153. See

David and Nabal, a clever word-play links the two characters through their mutual association with the word כלב, 'dog'. David dismisses himself as a "dead dog" (כלב מת) before Saul, emphasising his insignificance before the king (1 Sam 24:15). Upon his introduction into the narrative, Nabal is identified as a Calebite (כלבו); scholars have debated as to the significance of this detail—some tracing Nabal's lineage back through the Calebite clan, while others argue that the term simply serves as an insult (referring back to כלב as 'dog'): Nabal is dog-like in his stubborn stupidity (25:3).[197] Either way, this repeated (and memorable) descriptor underscores David and Nabal's similarity as the underdog in chapters 24 and 25 respectively.

In contrast to her husband (a dog and a fool), Abigail is introduced in favourable terms: she is both wise and beautiful (25:3). The language used to describe Abigail here (טובת שכל ויפת תאר) is also used to describe David elsewhere (1 Sam 16:12, 18:14, 15, 30).[198] As Jackson observes, "These two are Intelligent, Successful, Beautiful People."[199] Abigail, however, is the only one to maintain this composure in the face of Nabal's churlishness; David quickly descends to the same level of foolhardiness as Abigail's less remarkable half. It is at this climactic moment in the plot that Abigail's oath and subsequent speech remind David of the responsibility inherent in power, thereby realigning his trajectory with that of a God-ordained Israelite monarch. While her oath credits God with preventing David from shedding the innocent blood of Nabal's household, Abigail's ensuing speech identifies the key characteristics of a godly leader and his/her execution of power (1 Sam 25:28-31):

> Please lift the transgression of your maidservant, for Yhwh will surely deal faithfully with the house of my lord, because my lord is fighting the battles of Yhwh. And wickedness will not be found in your hand as long as you live. If anyone should arise to pursue you and seek your life, then the life of my lord will be wrapped up in the bundle of the living by Yhwh your God. But the life of your enemies he shall sling out, as from the hollow of a sling. And it will be—when Yhwh has done for my lord according to all the good he has spoken over you, and has appointed you to rule over Israel—then this will not be a stumbling block for you or an obstacle for the heart of my lord, that you shed blood vainly or that my lord saved himself. And when Yhwh has dealt well with my lord, remember your maidservant.

Bosworth, *The Story Within a Story*, 79-81, for an alternate reading of Nabal's name.

197. This reading gains leverage with the fact that the term כלבו comes at the end of a list of Nabal's insufficiencies (1 Sam 25:3). It seems most likely that the root כלב serves a double function here: on the surface, it innocently identifies Nabal as a member of an Israelite clan; more subversively, it underlines his disagreeable nature. See Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 127-28; Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 153-54; Ellen Van Wolde, "A Leader Led By a Lady: David and Abigail in I Samuel 25," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114, no. 3 (2002), 356-57.

198. See Levenson, "1 Samuel 25," 18.

199. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 155.

שׂא נא לפשׁע אמתך כי עשׂה יעשׂה יהוה לאדני בית נאמן כי מלחמות יהוה אדני נלחם ורעה לא תמצא בך מימיך: ויקם אדם לרדפך ולבקשׁ את נפשׁך והיתה נפשׁ אדני צרורה בצרור החיים את יהוה אלהיך ואת נפשׁ איביך יקלענה בתוך כף הקלע: והיה כי יעשׂה יהוה לאדני ככל אשׁר דבר את הטובה עליך וצוך לנגיד על ישׂראל: ולא תהיה זאת לך לפוקה ולמכשׁול לב לאדני ולשׁפך דם חנם ולהושׁיע אדני לו והיטב יהוה לאדני וזכרת את אמתך:

At the outset, Abigail distinguishes between "the battles of Yhwh" and those fought for the purpose of securing one's own wellbeing. Certainly, David is no stranger to bloodshed—the Israelite battlecry in 1 Sam 18:6 ("Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands!") exemplifies this fact.[200] And yet, according to Abigail, these battles are God-ordained and approved, whereas David's personal vendetta against an unsuspecting Israelite community would leave his hands stained with innocent blood. Abigail assures David that, if he refrains from wielding his power against the innocent and thereby securing his own victory, God will destroy all who stand in his way (here Abigail cleverly gestures to David's triumph over Goliath with her use of the term קלע, 'sling').[201] Thus, the crucial message of Abigail's poignant speech is this: in order for David to succeed in his role as a paragon of Israelite kingship, he must only exert his power in Yhwh's preordained battles; the abuse of this power for personal ends will ultimately undermine his favour as God's chosen king.[202]

Though he had been poised to embark on a killing spree (motivated primarily by his injured pride) David relents and exercises similar restraint in his second encounter with Saul in chapter 26. As we shall see, David's oaths in chapter 26 highlight the fact that he has taken Abigail's instruction to heart: not only does he swear to leave Saul's fate in God's hands, but he speaks a condemnatory oath over Abner and his men, who fail in their duty to protect life. The impetus of Abigail's interjection at the heart of this three-part narrative is clear in the effect it has on David; in fact, though the rest of David's career is far from unblemished, he is often grieved by the misuse of power.[203] David's repeated encounters with Saul in chapters 24 and 26 are arranged concentrically around Abigail's oath in a manner that underscores the importance of her words in the definition and formation of a powerful and just king.

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200. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 208-09.

201. See Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 191, and Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 211-12.

202. In Chapman's words, "David can fight 'the battles of the Lord' (*milhāmôt Yhwh,* 25:28) most effectively by trusting God to fight his battles for him," Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 191.

203. See 2 Sam 1:14-16; 4:8-11. This struggle is particularly apparent in David's relationship with the sons of Zeruiah, who employ power in a ruthless and haphazard way (see Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 213, fn 72). Of course, David's virtue as a leader is dramatically compromised by the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah later in his career as Israel's king (2 Sam 11). See Levenson, "1 Samuel 25," 23, on 1 Sam 25 as the first indication of evil in David's character.

4.3: Overview of Oaths in 1 Samuel 24-26

The theatrics of 1 Sam 24-26 are remarkable: David grovels (identifying himself as a harmless flea and a dog's carcass, 1 Sam 24:14), Saul soliloquises his fickle remorse, Nabal brutishly scoffs at David and his men, and Abigail gives a flattering speech to mollify David's bruised pride. Amidst the melodrama, emphatic statements provide a window into each speaker's character. The primary focus of this section is Abigail's oath, which serves as a turning point in the narrative as a whole and for the character of David in particular. It is worth noting, however, the seven other oaths that occur throughout the pericope of chapters 24-26, each of which play an important part in the framework of this story. The oaths that precede Abigail's set the scene and emphasise the need for her timely intervention, while the oaths that follow highlight the effect of her speech on David in particular and the narrative landscape as a whole.

In chapter 24, David finds himself in a cave, surrounded by his men and confronted with an unexpected encounter with his enemy. Having set out to kill David, Saul ambles into a cave along the way to relieve himself, unknowingly crouching in the presence of the very troop he has set out to exterminate. Unsurprisingly, David's men urge him to take advantage of the situation: a more providential opportunity for David to rout and expose Saul could hardly be imagined. At first, David's response to his men's urging is ambiguous; he creeps towards Saul but, when he is within arm's reach, decides only to cut off a corner of his enemy's cloak.[204] Despite his apparent restraint, David is stricken with guilt over his actions and responds to his men's bloodlust with the following oath (1 Sam 24:7):

> Yhwh forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, Yhwh's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, because he is Yhwh's anointed.
>
> חלילה לי מיהוה אם אעשׂה את הדבר הזה לאדני למשׁיח יהוה לשׁלח ידי בו כי משׁיח יהוה הוא׃

In the face of David's restraint, Saul's jealousy is (albeit temporarily) pacified. This abrupt change of heart is exemplified by Saul's contrition; in fact, the sudden reversal of Saul's feelings towards David is hyperbolic and intensified for both comedic and emphatic effect. Saul calls David his son, provides him with a tearful apology, blesses him, and states with certainty that David will take his place as king (the very possibility of which had brought Saul out with an army just a few

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204. Perhaps the severed corner of Saul's robe is simply a prop in this story, with which David is able to prove that he had the opportunity to kill Saul but chose not to do so. It is likely, however, that the act of cutting off a piece of Saul's robe has a deeper significance as well, symbolising the removal of Saul's kingdom (1 Sam 15:27-28, 1 Kngs 11:26ff). See Robert P. Gordon, "David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24-26," *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980), 55-57; Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 186; Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 209; Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 458-59; Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 148.

verses prior). With this prospect in mind, Saul begs David to swear an oath of loyalty to the former's offspring, ensuring that David will not wipe out Saul's line upon taking the throne. Although the exact terms of this oath are not quoted here, David's compliance with Saul's wish only adds to his already commendable reputation: the act of decimating all that is left of a rival's line is a common one amongst Israelite judges and monarchy throughout Hebrew Bible.[205] David's willingness to forgo this means of securing the throne for himself speaks both to his willingness to rely on God for his success (an outlook already expressed in 24:12) and his reluctance to shed innocent blood.

David's restraint is quickly thrown into question, however, with his very next oath. An abrupt transition marks the beginning of chapter 25, in which it is David's vulnerability that is highlighted, in more ways than one. To begin with, the renegade and his followers are hungry and are reduced to begging for food from a wealthy stranger, Nabal. Unfortunately, Nabal is also the epitome of a fool, who churlishly shrugs off David's request and mocks his messengers.[206] Nabal's dismissal of David is startling given the favour that the latter has earned with both God and men (even Ahimelech the priest does not refuse David's unorthodox request for holy bread just three chapters prior, 1 Sam 21:6). Nevertheless, Nabal's disregard for David is adamant and boorish, placing David's forbearance once more under strain. Despite David's remarkable composure in the face of a vengeful king and his army just a few verses before, Nabal's ridicule and refusal proves too much for him to handle. In a fit of rage, David swears to wipe out Nabal and all who are with him (1 Sam 25:22):

> God do so to the enemies of David, and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to [Nabal].[207]
>
> כה יעשׂה אלהים לאיבי דוד וכה יסיף אם אשׁאיר מכל אשׁר לו עד הבקר משׁתין בקיר׃

Scholars disagree on the meaning of the phrase משׁתין בקיר (or, "those who urinate on a wall"). According to Ziegler, early interpretations took this as a reference to Nabal's dog (i.e., not even the most insignificant of Nabal's possessions will survive David's vengeance), while modern scholars tend to view it as a gesture to every male in Nabal's retinue.[208] Either way, not only does this

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205. See for example Judg 9:5, 1 Kgs 15:29, 1 Kgs 16:11, 2 Kgs 10:7.

206. Esler suggests that Nabal's reputation precedes him, given the careful speech that David sends with his messengers (25:6-8), Philip F. Esler, “Abigail: A Woman of Wisdom and Decisive Action,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, ed. Keith and Benjamin J. M. Johnson Bodner (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 171-72.

207. See earlier section on the formulae of biblical oaths for a discussion on the unique variation of the כה יעשה formula employed here.

208. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 207, fn 56. Garsiel adheres to earlier interpretations of this phrase as a reference to a urinating dog: "By employing this image, David retaliates in a 'measure for measure' way for Nabal's earlier insults against his family line," Garsiel, *David and His Kingdom*, 184. This phrase no doubt serves a multiplicity of ends here, conjuring both a dog (especially when read in concert with the recurrent use of the root כלב throughout the narrative, see 24:15, 25:3) and

colourful phrase play into the comedic tone already established here, but it emphasises the extent to which David has lost his previously impervious composure. The narrative makes clear that David's messengers interact with Nabal alone; there is no indication that anyone else in his household is in opposition to David (in fact, it quickly becomes clear that even Nabal's servants disagree with his decision and openly deride his leadership, 1 Sam 25:14-17). Thus, whether it is Nabal's dog, or his men, or both, that are implicated by David's oath, one thing is clear: even the innocent are not safe in the face of David's wounded pride. The pendulum swing of David's mood from the previous chapter (in which he chastises himself for besmirching the corner of Saul's cloak), to his flammable temper and sudden eagerness to spill innocent blood, is striking. The reader is left to wonder whether David's patience is, in fact, so fickle, and whether his previously unflappable kindness might dissolve so quickly into a killing spree.

It is at this pivotal moment that Abigail's oath changes the course of David's actions and the trajectory of his future kingship. Notified by one of Nabal's servants (who grasps the implications of Nabal's foolhardy response to David's messengers), Abigail spares no time in usurping her husband's authority, gathering provisions, and setting out to meet David and his men.[209] The encounter between David and his troop and Abigail and her retinue comes at a climactic point in the narrative, and one that is fraught with tension. The reader is aware of the circumstances and emotions that have brought each one to this decisive point: Abigail, in a burst of action, has gathered food for an army and slipped away without Nabal's notice; David, meanwhile, fumes to himself as he descends in Nabal's direction, apparently having lost all grip on reason. Upon meeting David, Abigail must choose her words carefully. In strikingly self-sacrificial tones, Abigail begins by taking full responsibility and requests that she alone bear the punishment for which David has whetted his sword. Immediately, David's lack of concern for the innocent is thrown into sharp relief against Abigail's willingness to suffer on behalf of those needlessly caught in the crossfire between the fool and the outlaw. In the same breath, Abigail stops David in his tracks with a timely oath (1 Sam 25:26):

> Now, my lord, as Yhwh lives, and as you live—Yhwh who has kept you from shedding blood and your hand from taking vengeance—may your enemies and those who seek evil against my lord be like Nabal.
>
> ועתה אדני חי יהוה וחי נפשׁך אשׁר מנעך יהוה מבוא בדמים והושׁע ידך לך ועתה יהיו כנבל איביך והמבקשׁים אל אדני רעה׃

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simultaneously gesturing to all of the men in Nabal's service. This latter reading is consistent with the use of this phrase elsewhere in Hebrew Bible (see 1 Kgs 14:10, 16:11, 21:21, and 2 Kgs 8:8).

209. Garsiel observes the irony inherent in Nabal's description of David as a disloyal slave (25:10) in light of the fact that one of Nabal's own servants speaks of his master with such derision just a few verses later (25:14), Ibid., 182. See also Klein, *1 Samuel*, 249 and Levenson, "1 Samuel 25," 16.

Here Abigail accomplishes two equally important ends at once: not only does she relegate Nabal to the same fate as anyone else who might oppose David (rather than defending her husband's actions), but she declares that it is Yhwh who has intercepted David on his murderous mission. With remarkable subtlety, Abigail makes explicit the true nature of David's intentions against Nabal, which involve shedding (innocent) blood and taking vengeance for himself (a role that he has heretofore entrusted to Yhwh, 1 Sam 24:12). Rather than openly reprimanding David (which would likely have little effect in his hotheaded state), Abigail provides David with an opportunity to once again trust God with the ultimate end of his enemies. Not only this, but Abigail seeks to sober him up with the notion that it is Yhwh—and not simply herself—who stands in David's way. In the speech that follows, Abigail underlines the importance of David's clear conscience before God, who will ultimately uphold his cause and establish his kingship.

With regard to the חי יהוה formula, Ziegler notes that the oath is usually spoken succinctly and without additional clauses.[210] There are exceptions to this rule, however, and Ziegler posits that additional clauses—when present—are always worth noting. A subordinate descriptive clause within the חי יהוה formula provides a key to the significance of the oath within its given narrative context. A closer look at Abigail's speech exemplifies this point: the subordinate clause of her oath (which is indicated by אשר) identifies Yhwh as the one who has kept David from wanton bloodshed.[211] At the centre of a three-part pericope dealing with just (and unjust) employments of power, Abigail highlights the fact that it is Yhwh who has actively prevented David from misusing his authority thus far. In fact, this brief clause within her oath could be seen as a centrepiece for chapters 24-26 as a whole, an apt reminder of the implications of the (mis)use of power.

David is cut to the heart by Abigail's words, and quickly recognises his wrong. He responds with another oath, which knits together elements of his former rash statement against Nabal and his household, and Abigail's instructive response (1 Sam 25:34):

> For, as Yhwh the God of Israel lives—who kept me from hurting you—if you had not hurried and come to meet me, truly there would not have remained to Nabal a single man by daybreak.
>
> ואולם חי יהוה אלהי ישׂראל אשׁר מנעני מהרע אתך כי לולי מהרת ותבאתי לקראתי כי אם נותר לנבל עד אור הבקר משׁתין בקיר׃

Echoing the first words of Abigail's oath, David uses the חי יהוה formula and identifies God as the one who has kept him from needless killing. Once again, the descriptive subordinate clause included

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210. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 111.

211. Interestingly, in her analysis of this text Ziegler does not comment on the subordinate clause in Abigail's oath, though she does take note of this feature in David's subsequent oath in response (see Ibid., 113).

in David's oath is illuminating: while Abigail's oath credits Yhwh with preventing David from shedding blood in general, David sees divine intervention more specifically in the fact that he was not allowed to kill *Abigail*.[212] In fact, David attributes to Abigail the deliverance of Nabal's household from death ("if *you* had not hurried and come to meet me…").[213] The fact that Abigail's words strike a chord with David is clear in his immediate change of mind: accepting her gift of food, David blesses her and bids her return home in peace. Nevertheless, Ziegler has noted that the second half of David's oath retains the threatening tone of his initial words against Nabal ("truly there would not have remained to Nabal a single man by daybreak"). Although Abigail's timely and perceptive words defuse David's bloodlust, the final line of his second oath suggests that he has not forgotten Nabal's insult. Instead, David makes the choice (motivated by Abigail's sage advice) to leave the fate of his enemies in God's hand, trusting that Nabal's cruelty will not go unpunished.[214] Of course, only a handful of verses later David receives news of Nabal's swift demise, and his vindication is secured.

Yhwh's prompt execution of justice against Nabal is fresh in David's mind upon his next encounter with Saul. Immediately following his interlude with Abigail, David once again finds himself with the upper hand against Saul, who has reneged on his (briefly) peaceable intentions towards the outlaw and his men (1 Sam 24:17-22). Having changed his mind, Saul sets out to kill David in the wilderness; upon hearing of Saul's approach, David and his men (rather than hiding or taking flight) head straight towards their enemies. On the heels of the previous chapter, this decision creates immediate suspense: will David, once again, take matters into his own hands and seek vengeance for himself? Each of the final three oaths that occur in chapter 26 demonstrate the dramatic change in David's attitude towards his enemies and his own vindication following his pivotal encounter with Abigail.

When David and his men happen upon Saul in the wilderness, David is once again faced with a fortuitous opportunity to kill his enemy. Saul, and all his troops around him, lie slumbering—sprawled before David in a comedically impotent state, providing ample occasion for David to inflict vengeance without hardly lifting a finger. Instead, David forfeits his advantage and tiptoes into the midst of Saul's men, accompanied by Abishai alone. When the two reach Saul, Abishai seems to anticipate David's restraint; rather than urging David to deal a deathblow, Abishai offers (quite eagerly) to do the deed on David's behalf. David's response, however, is both firm and premeditated: this time, there is no sign of wavering in David's determination to leave his enemy unscathed.

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212. Ibid., 114.
213. Emphasis mine.
214. Ibid., 210.

Indeed, his response to Abishai's bloodlust is resolute and underscored by two successive oaths (1 Sam 26:10-11):

> David said, "As Yhwh lives, Yhwh will strike him, or his day will come and he will die, or he will fall in battle and be swept away. Yhwh forbid that I should stretch out my hand against Yhwh's anointed; but now, take the spear that is at his head and the water jug, and let us go."
>
> ויאמר דוד חי יהוה כי אם יהוה יגפנו או יומו יבוא ומת או במלחמה ירד ונספה: חלילה לי מיהוה מִשְׁלֹח ידי במִשִׁיח יהוה ועתה קח נא את החנית אשׁר מראשׁתו ואת צפחת המים ונלכה לנו:

The first of these oaths highlights the lesson that David learned in the previous chapter: when left in the hands of God, his enemies will surely meet their end and justice will be served. The resonance of David's conversation with Abigail and the subsequent death of Nabal is made explicit with the reoccurring term, נגף, 'to strike'.[215] Shortly after David abandons his raid against Nabal, the latter is struck (נגף) by God and dies; in his second encounter with Saul, David is therefore confident that there is no need for him to meddle in Saul's fate—in his own time and his own way, Yhwh will strike (נגף) Saul and, indeed (according to Abigail's prophetic speech), all who stand in David's way. This newfound assurance on David's part is further underlined by the second half of this two-part oath. After trimming the corner of Saul's cloak in the cave in chapter 24, David retrospectively swore that he would not (again) raise a hand against Saul ("Yhwh forbid that I should…stretch out my hand against him," 24:7); in 26:11, David repeats this oath almost verbatim ("Yhwh forbid that I should stretch out my hand against Yhwh's anointed"), but this time without having raised a finger in Saul's direction, and with clear confidence in God's ability to deliver (vs 10).[216]

Given this second instance of David's restraint towards Saul, and the profound lesson that he has learned under the tutelage of Abigail, David's final oath of this chapter initially seems at odds with all that has gone before. After collecting Saul's spear and water jug and and retreating back to his men, David shouts to Abner and his army from afar (1 Sam 26:16):

> As Yhwh lives, you are sons of death, because you did not guard your lord, Yhwh's anointed.
>
> חי יהוה כי בני מות אתם אשׁר לא שׁמרתם על אדניכם על מִשִׁיח יהוה

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215. Ibid., 212-13.

216. Miscall provides a starkly different reading of David's interaction with Saul in 1 Sam 26. Rather than viewing David's refusal to lay a finger on Saul as evidence of his restraint, Miscall sees it as a power play: "To show in an impressive manner that he can kill, David does not kill," Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 162. I would argue that this interpretation requires one to read against the grain of the narrative and, more specifically, to ignore the gravity of David's oaths. As already demonstrated, emphatic statements frequently provide undiluted insight into the surrounding context and the characters by whom they are spoken; David's repeated oaths in this chapter prove no exception.

The phrase בני מות likely serves as a death sentence.[217] Despite exercising remarkable self-control over Saul, David is quick to designate Saul's men to death as a result of their negligence. However, two elements of David's chastisement of Abner and his soldiers serve, in fact, to highlight David's constraint: first, David does not execute this punishment himself, though he had the chance to do so; and second, David's displeasure with Saul's men is a result of their own failure to protect and preserve life. Standing amidst Saul's soporific army, David could have summoned his own men to teach them a lesson, sparing Saul's life but decimating his forces around him. If it were simply Saul—God's anointed—whose blood David was unwilling to shed, he could have simultaneously saved Saul's life and made a spectacle of his inattentive army. Instead, David lets both Saul and his men escape unscathed, but not without a severe reprimand.[218] Abner and his army—who are entrusted with the life of their king—were quite literally asleep on the job, carelessly placing Saul in harms way and thereby implicating themselves, should his blood have been shed. Not only does David hold his own men accountable and prevent them from shedding blood, but he derides Saul's men for the complicit role they play with anyone who might seek to harm the king.

Each of the oaths featured throughout this three-part exposé on the (mis)use of power highlights the progression and development of this theme. Abigail's oath takes place at the very centre of this pericope and at the height of plot tension, as David prepares to take matters into his own hands and inflict vengeance on the innocent. At the heart of her oath (with the unique feature of a subordinate clause) Abigail makes explicit the fact that Yhwh is involved in and aware of each leader's employment of power. With this timely reminder, David is dissuaded from exacting justice on his own terms and by his own means. The oaths preceding and following Abigail's exemplify David's own relationship with power and reveal the persuasive effect of his encounter with Abigail.

4.4: Character Portraits: Saul, David, and Abigail

The use of comedy throughout these three chapters lends itself to caricature, a useful means by which to highlight the stark contrast between characters and exemplify their success and failure, respectively.[219] Oaths, too, lend themselves to a dramatic and often hyperbolic portrayal of their

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217. 1 Sam 20:31, 2 Sam 12:5; see Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 214, fn 76.

218. In fact, when David later becomes king, Abner deserts Saul and joins forces with David. At this point, there is no indication that David intends to enact the death sentence that he himself pronounces here; indeed, when Abner is killed, David goes out of his way to make clear that he does not condone his murder (2 Sam 3).

219. See Levenson, "1 Samuel 25," 13-20, for a thorough analysis of characterisation in 1 Sam 25. For comedy and characterisation in this story see Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 152-60, and Garsiel, "Wit, Words, and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25."

speaker(s); in concert, these two literary strategies work together in 1 Sam 24-26 to conjure, in turn, a dithering king, an heroic renegade, a devilish fool, and a compelling heroine. Farce—as a mode of comedy—pervades throughout, accentuating the theme of the (mis)use of power amidst laughable scenarios and ridiculous responses.[220] Of the handful of characters who play an important role in these stories, three feature prominently: Saul, David, and Abigail.

Garsiel has argued that chapters 24-26 provide a well-rounded portrayal of both David and Saul; while this is certainly true of David, whose behaviour changes dramatically in chapter 25, it is questionable with regard to Saul.[221] In Garsiel's view, Saul's "contrition" in the face of David's restraint is a sign of his ability to change for the better; likewise his retreat from pursuing David displays a change of heart.[222] However, the repetition of Saul's hotheaded pursuit renders his subsequent penitence redundant: a more accurate interpretation of Saul's actions is arguably as the caricature of a feeble and fickle king.[223] This reading is exemplified by the fact that, despite the formidable act of mustering his army and setting out to take David's life, Saul is repeatedly exposed to his enemies in the most vulnerable of positions possible. If this is not enough to relegate Saul to the role of a less-than-impressive foil for David, the king's abject and self-deprecating response to David's confrontation confirms his impotency. From the outset of the book, Saul's inconsistency and lack of courage have defined his kingship; now more than ever is this caricature utilised to its full potential.

Saul does not make any oaths of his own over the course of these three chapters, but he does request an oath from the mouth of David. This pledge serves only to further highlight the contrast between these two characters: Saul acknowledges that, despite his best efforts to do away with David, the latter will one day be king.[224] In light of this, Saul begs David to promise his protection

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220. Jackson describes farce as "characterized by a mixture of sexuality, horseplay, and buffoonery, with its characters thrust into ludicrous and impossible situations," Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 20.

221. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 123-24. If there is any development to Saul's character here it is not positive in nature; rather his authority unravels and he ultimately departs from David in a state of certainty (his own, his fellow-characters', and the reader's) as to David's right to the throne.

222. Ibid., 124.

223. An added element of Saul's characterisation in this narrative episode is the relationship between his role and Nabal's. Scholars frequently comment on the connection(s) between these two characters, see Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 190; Gordon, "David's Rise," 43-45; Bosworth, *The Story Within a Story*, 72-77; Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 211-12. Indeed, Saul is likened to Nabal in Abigail's speech: "…may your enemies and those who seek evil against my lord be like Nabal" (25:26).

224. Chapman notes the significant tension between Saul, who is already aware that he has been rejected as king over Israel (see 1 Sam 15), and David, who is the recipient of divine and human favour. "…much of the suspense found in the latter part of 1 Samuel arises from the dramatic irony

over the remnant of Saul's family. David complies, and the oath serves as yet another example of Saul's failing leadership and David's benevolent use of power. Indeed, the fact that—in a narrative riddled with oaths—Saul does not make a single pledge himself but is reduced to requesting an oath of protection from his enemy is certainly significant.

In contrast, David speaks the majority of the oaths that occur between chapters 24 and 26. The bulk of these are expressions of restraint, measured responses to sudden power. Of course, the exception is David's brash oath against Nabal, in which he is briefly intoxicated by his power to crush his enemies. Rather than being stagnant, like Saul, David's character is in flux throughout these narratives: initially reticent to exact justice with his own hand, he is briefly reduced to impetuous and childlike rage over Nabal's rudeness; thanks to Abigail's timely and subtle scolding, he eventually emerges as a stoic and just king. Although it is arguably David's development (alongside the demise of Saul's leadership) that emerges at the forefront of these successive stories, his role is ultimately encapsulated in his characterisation as Israel's paragon king. Indeed, all of David's previous and subsequent actions—from his victory over Goliath, to his dealings with Mephibosheth, to his murder of Uriah, to his lament over Absalom—play into his role as the ideal (if imperfect) Israelite monarch.[225]

Like Saul, Abigail's depiction is flat, though—in her case—favourable. Amidst the egotistical battles of Israel's leaders and her own husband, Abigail emerges as a voice of reason. Indeed, she is introduced as a caricature of wisdom and beauty, particularly in contrast to Nabal, the rich fool.[226] Her role is crucial for the trajectory of David's rule and the establishment of a metric by which Israelite kings must exercise power. Although Abigail speaks only one oath, it is arguably the most important of all: halting David in his tracks, her words remind David that he is accountable to God for his use of power and reassure him with the prediction that God will reduce David's enemies, like Nabal, to naught. Thus, alongside Saul (the failing king) and David (his noble but impetuous replacement), Abigail emerges as the true heroine of this story, whose timely intervention saves the

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of the reader's sure knowledge of David's anointing—in contrast to Saul, who seems to suspect more than he knows for certain," Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 187. See also Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 209. Saul's statement and subsequent request in 24:21-22 suggest the depths of his foreboding: "I know now that you will be king, and the kingdom of Israel will remain in your hand. And now swear to me by Yhwh that you will not cut off my descendants after me or wipe out my name from my father's house."

225. According to 1 Kgs 15:5, David maintains his just use of power throughout his kingship, in all cases except that of Uriah, husband of Bathsheba.

226. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 153. In his analysis of the role of speech in characterisation, Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 66, notes that Abigail's words reveal her wisdom and eloquence.

day.

4.5: Conclusion

The problem of power and its (ab)use is a prominent theme throughout each of these three successive stories, each of which prove to be particularly defining for David as future-king. Chapters 24 and 26 juxtapose Saul and David and their respective use of power; in chapter 25, the plot reaches a pinnacle and David's ability to wield power justly is thrown into question. Were it not for Abigail's intervention at this point, David's career—like Saul's—would be tainted with the blood of the innocent. Not only does Abigail prevent David from exercising power against an innocent Israelite community, but her speech harkens back to Hannah's song at the outset of 1 Samuel, which sets a defining tone for Israelite leadership.[227]

The integral function of Abigail's oath for this narrative segment and the books of 1 and 2 Samuel as a whole is represented by the placement of her speech at the heart of a concentric structure, framed by two mirrored accounts of David's patience in the face of his enemy's pursuit.[228] Juxtaposed with these two accounts, David's desire for vengeance against Nabal is striking and drives the story's plot to a climax with the possibility that a previously just leader will shed innocent Israelite blood. Abigail's oath at the centre of it all initiates a dramatic turning point for David, and one that seems definitive for him as a character.

Not only this, but the unique subordinate clause of Abigail's oath sends a clear and resounding message, which points back to Hannah's song and continues to ripple throughout the stories of Israel's leadership from this point onwards. Yhwh has prevented David from exacting vengeance on his enemies or shedding innocent blood, the implication being that a successful, Yhwh-ordained leader in Israel must refrain from these actions. This brief statement at the heart of Abigail's oath encapsulates the underlying impetus of this narrative segment, which identifies restraint and a just employment of power as essential characteristics for Israel's king.

Lastly, the use of a comedic tone and a plethora of emphatic statements plays a significant part in the characterisation of Saul, David, and Abigail. While Saul is rendered incompetent and vengeful, David is more complex: capable of volatility, he is also able to learn from his mistakes (provided he has the timely intervention of Abigail, or—later in his career—Nathan). Abigail is the only character presented here without flaw, and with a clear understanding of Yhwh's requirements

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227. See chapter four of this thesis for further analysis of Hannah's contribution.

228. Fokkelman provides a thorough analysis of the structure of 1 Sam 25 and places Abigail's oath at the very heart of the narrative—the point at which the plot's crisis reaches its crescendo and turns towards resolution, Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 528.

for effective leadership. Her brief appearance at the pivotal moment of this narrative, along with the profundity of her oath, identify Abigail as a character to be admired and heeded.

Jephthah's Daughter: On Dancing & Weeping

And Jephthah made a vow to Yhwh and said, "If you will surely give the sons of Amon into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me on my return in peace from the Ammonites shall be Yhwh's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.

וידר יפתח נדר ליהוה ויאמר אם נתון תתן את בני עמון בידי: והיה היוצא אשׁר יצא מדלתי ביתי לקראתי בשׁובי בשׁלום מבני עמון והיה ליהוה והעליתהו עולה:

5.1: Introduction

Throughout the narratives of Hebrew Bible, oaths and vows increase or relieve plot tension, highlight the import or irony of a given interaction, reveal characters' unseen motivations, and distinguish hero(in)es from their less than noble counterparts. In the stories of Ruth and Abigail, oaths are used in all of these capacities and ultimately draw attention to two pivotal episodes with equally remarkable heroines at the fore. In the case of the Jephthah narrative, a vow plays an equally important role, with similar effect and yet a very different outcome. Jephthah's vow brings the plot to an unexpected and agonising climax, while simultaneously exposing the faithlessness, not only of Jephthah himself, but of the entire nation of Israel. A predominant symptom of Israel's departure from following Yhwh and their subsequent depravity is the violent dehumanisation of female characters throughout the book of Judges. This ugly motif is catalysed by the slaughter of Jephthah's daughter and culminates in the dismemberment of the concubine and the kidnapping and forced marriage of four hundred virgins and the daughters of Shiloh at the conclusion of the book.

Jephthah's vow is a valuable example in this study of the literary import of emphatic statements in relation to female characters of Hebrew Bible. Oaths in the books of Ruth and 1 Samuel 25 magnify the crucial role that both Ruth and Abigail play; in contrast, Jephthah's vow reveals the underbelly of Hebrew Bible's portrayal of female agency and dignity. The first section of this chapter will focus on the narrative landscape of the book of Judges, tracing the ripple effects of Jephthah's vow throughout the rest of the story. In particular, it is interesting to consider the treatment of female characters in the book as a symptom of Israel's relationship to Yhwh: at the outset of the narrative, stories like that of Achsah and Jael depict a nation that is still tethered (albeit loosely) to Yhwh and in which female characters function with relative autonomy and leadership. As the narrative progresses, and with the fulfilment of Jephthah's vow, the book's plot takes a downward turn and each successive story featuring a female character depicts a sore lack of dignity or justice

for women in Israel. These two themes progress hand-in-hand: with Israel's increasing departure from Yhwh and his instruction, female characters in the book of Judges become pawns at best, commodities at worst. Jephthah's tragic vow and subsequent sacrifice of his daughter mark a definitive turning point in the overall trajectory of this theme.[229]

The second half of this chapter examines Jephthah's vow itself, and its repercussions. The immediate context (brief but mirrored accounts of the judges that precede and follow his rule) serves as a creative means by which to highlight the centrality and importance of the Jephthah story in the book as a whole. And although critics have long debated the motivation behind Jephthah's vow, the subtleties of his vow provide clues as to his culpability. Finally, a closer look at Jephthah's daughter reveals her death as a foreshadow of the dismal fate of female characters through the remainder of the book. The ritual weeping of her companions, then, comes not only to memorialise the death of Jephthah's unnamed daughter, but also to represent the ongoing and devastating effects of male violence and domination through the end of the book of Judges, and beyond.

5.2: Mapping the Narrative Landscape

Jephthah's vow marks a turning point in the the book of Judges, which begins with a collection of narratives that revolve around powerful female characters, but quickly unravels into accounts of civil warfare and the commodification of female bodies. The narrative progression from Achsah's boldness, Deborah's leadership, and Jael's victory, to the violent rape and death of the concubine and the theft and exchange of hundreds of (equally nameless) Israelite women, is as significant as it is steep. As we shall see, Jephthah's problematic vow plays a pivotal role in this sequence: prior to the death of his daughter, four powerful women play key roles, three of whom secure Israel's victory and peace amidst warfare. Following the fulfilment of Jephthah's fateful vow, four more women appear, all of whom bear some connection to the impetuous judge, Samson. Indeed, Samson's legacy is intertwined with the women who define him, and—ultimately—prove to be his undoing. These women's narratives are complicated: Samson's mother is confided in twice by the angel of Yhwh, and yet remains nameless and overlooked by her husband. Samson's wife and the prostitute[230] in Gaza feature as pawns—nameless and caught in the throes of an egotistical battle

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229. Wong argues for a progressive "deterioration" throughout the judge cycles (2:6-16:31), which is symptomised by (among other things) a decline in Israel's faith and Yhwh's patience, Gregory T.K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 156-81. I would add one more symptom to Wong's list: the decrease in dignity and agency afforded to female characters throughout the book.

230. Elsewhere I have chosen the term 'sex-worker' as a preferred translation of the Hebrew term זונה. In the case of the woman from Gaza I have consciously (and carefully) chosen to translate זונה

between Samson and his rivals. Delilah, the last female character to be named, provides a brief—albeit controversial—reprieve from the suppression of female agency in the book of Judges. Like Jael, Delilah lulls a warrior to sleep, plotting his demise all the while; it is at her hand that the Philistines secure a victory over the seemingly invincible judge. Crucially, Delilah is not Israelite, nor are the men who (much like Israel did in the case of Jael) benefit from her victory. Israel's enemies succeed, then, because they do what Israel has increasingly failed to do since the death of Jephthah's daughter: afford agency to their female counterparts. Indeed, both autonomy and dignity are increasingly stripped from female characters as the narrative progresses from this point, a fact that is never more apparent than in the final four stories of Israelite women in the book of Judges. All four of these (groups of) women are unnamed, and (apart from Micah's mother) are brutally dehumanised at the hands of Israelite men.

In order to understand the profound and dismal repercussions of Jephthah's vow on the narrative trajectory of the book of Judges, it is necessary to take a step back and take in the broader picture that is painted by the cumulative stories of each of these women.[231] To that end, it is worth examining each of these three (four-part) collections of women's stories in the book of Judges, beginning with the initial stories of strength (Achsah, Deborah, Jael, and the woman with the millstone), followed by the women of the Samson narrative (Samson's mother, his wife, the prostitute, and Delilah), and culminating with the final stories of the book's horrifying conclusion (Micah's mother, the concubine, the four hundred virgins, and the daughters of Shiloh). Not only do these stories encapsulate the degeneration of Israelite morality and the swift removal of female agency, but they account for all of the book's narratives that feature female characters with any (albeit often meagre) prominence, from the books' prologue (Achsah, 1:12-15) to its epilogue (the virgins of Shiloh, 21:19-24).[232] The following table includes each narrative considered here and

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as 'prostitute,' mindful of pejorative weight of this term. The aim of this chapter is to trace the devolution of female agency throughout the book of Judges and I would argue that the depiction of the woman of Gaza as a זונה is intentionally marginalising. To refer to her here as 'prostitute' is to reflect the dignity that she is denied—because the denial of dignity is a theme to be traced here—rather the dignity she deserves.

231. Klein similarly provides an overview of key female characters throughout the book of Judges. She chooses to organise these stories with the categories *positive* and *negative* (based on their presentation by the "implied author") and *active* or *passive* (determined by the actions—or lack thereof—of the female character in question), Lillian R. Klein, "A Spectrum of Female Characters," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

232. It is important to note three female characters that I have chosen not to include here: the mother of Abimelech (9:1-3), Jephthah's mother (11:1-3), and the sister of Samson's wife (15:2b). The mention of each of these women in the text is brief and peripheral; in addition, none of these three characters engage in any action of their own.

reflects their position relative to the story of Jephthah's daughter:

Table 1: Female Characters in the Book of Judges

Stories of Strength	Jephthah's Daughter	Women of Samson's Story	Final Stories
Achsah (1:12-15)	(11:30-40)	Samson's Mother (13:2-25)	Micah's Mother (17:2-4)
Deborah (4:14-5:31)		Samson's Wife (14:1-15:2)	Concubine (19:1-29)
Jael (4:17-31)		Prostitute of Gaza (16:1-3)	Virgins of Jabesh Gilead (21:10-14)
Woman with Millstone (9:53-55)		Delilah (16:4-20)	Daughters of Shiloh (21:19-24)

In a chapter dedicated to arguing for the significance of Jephthah's vow, along with the literary import of emphatic statements in general, a foray into the narrative accounts of each of these women may appear as a less-than-relevant detour. However, an examination of each of these stories and the progressive dehumanisation of female characters in the book of Judges is necessary in order to understand the narrative landscape in which the vow appears and, indeed, which it shapes. In order to understand the climatic and essential role that Jephthah's vow and the subsequent death of his daughter play in the trajectory of female agency in the book as a whole, the scene must be set and the context arrayed. From Achsah's acquisition of an inheritance to the ambush against the daughters of Shiloh, Israel's departure from Yhwh's instruction is mirrored by the steady descent of female agency, until, in the final stories of the book, it is all but nonexistent. Jephthah's vow acts as a catalyst in this downward spiral; the full impact of his tragic pledge cannot be fully grasped, however, without a clear picture of the female characters who precede and follow the death of Jephthah's daughter. In order to understand the full import of Jephthah's vow for the book of Judges, it is helpful to explore not only the intricacies of this particular narrative, but the far-reaching repercussions of his pledge on the rise and fall of the book's plot as a whole. Indeed, here—perhaps more than anywhere else in Hebrew Bible—the implications of a single vow on the shape of an entire narrative are readily apparent.

5.2.1: Stories of Strength: Achsah, Deborah, Jael, & The Woman with a Millstone

At the outset of the book of Judges a brief but poignant narrative foreshadows the story of Jephthah and his daughter.[233] Initially, Achsah's role as a victor's prize suggests the commodification of her body, as she is effectively exchanged for property. Indeed, this reading is quickly apparent and

233. Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 104.

should not be overlooked, even in favour of the controversially positive outcome of her story. Nevertheless, the fact that Achsah boldly approaches her father, requests his blessing, and entreats him for a coveted piece of land, lends surprising dignity to her character.[234] Caleb's unhesitating fulfilment of her petition is emphasised by the additional detail included in the description of his response: Achsah asks for "springs of water" (גלת מים, Judg 1:15) and her father in turn provides her with both the "upper springs" and the "lower springs" (גלת עלית and גלת תחתית). Not only does Achsah gain her father's blessing and the status of an enviable landowner, but her father is eager to fulfil her wish in its entirety.[235] Achsah, then, emerges in the opening scenes of the book as a prominent and powerful female character; despite the circumstances of her marriage, she acts with considerable autonomy and gains a desirable inheritance for herself.[236]

Achsah's agency is apparent in the conquest of her own land; the exertion of Deborah and Jael's power leads instead to military victory for Israel. The two women's stories are intertwined and equally remarkable. Deborah, the first and only female judge, galvanises Barak and his troops into action against Sisera and his nine hundred iron chariots. In fact, Barak is unwilling to go to battle without Deborah's company; not unlike Caleb before him and the Gileadites after, Barak strikes a deal, this time in order to guarantee Deborah's aid (Judg 4:8):[237]

> Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go, but if you do not go with me, I will not go."
>
> ויאמר אליה ברק אם תלכי עמי והלכתי ואם לא תלכי עמי לא אלך׃

Deborah agrees to accompany him into battle, but assures Barak that he will not receive acclaim for their victory; rather, the glory of Sisera's demise will be given to a woman. Of course, the narrative plays tricks here with its reader: given that Deborah has already been introduced as an influential and effective leader, and given that she has few female counterparts, the reader feels justified in the assumption that Deborah refers to her own triumph over Sisera. Unexpectedly, Jael emerges as yet another powerful female character alongside Deborah; together, they defeat Sisera's forces and do

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234. See Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 41 and Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 29.

235. Othniel's role in this interaction is apparently insignificant. Though Achsah begins by instructing Othniel to approach her father himself with a request for land, his role is quickly (and inexplicably) eclipsed by Achsah's own interaction and acquisition from her father. Indeed, the text makes clear that it is Achsah who is the recipient of the land in question (ויתן לה כלב את גלת עלית ואת גלת תחתית).

236. Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 26.

237. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 65, sees Barak's request for Deborah's company not as cowardice but wisdom: "victory comes with the presence of God's favourite."

away with the commander himself. Their joint victory is resounding and is memorialised in song (Judg 5). As if to quench any lingering doubts as to the rightful recipients of this battle's renown, the song makes Deborah and Jael's leadership explicit. Deborah is described as "a mother in Israel" (אם בישׂראל, Judg 5:7) and though Barak's name appears twice in the song, it is always preceded by the name of Deborah as Israel's commander (5:12, 15).

Jael's triumph over Sisera earns her special mention in Deborah and Barak's song, in which she is identified as "most blessed among women" (5:24, תברך מנשׁים). Indeed, the guile and strength with which Jael dispatches the commander of Israel's enemies is recounted blow-by-blow, in chillingly poetic terms.[238] This portion of the song stands in stark contrast to the very next pericope, which conjures up Sisera's mother waiting at a latticed window for the return of her son and his troops from battle. In response to the mother's concern over Sisera's delay, the women in her attendance console her with thoughts of the spoils with which her son will return, which include "a womb or two for every man" (5:30, רחם רחמתים לראשׁ גבר).[239] Juxtaposed with Jael's agency is the picture of Israelite women captured in battle and distributed as (reproductive) loot amongst Sisera's men. The significance of this image has multiple layers: to begin with, the poetic scene is heavy with irony—rather than being dragged away as spoil, Israel's women (Deborah and Jael specifically) have in fact dealt the deathblow to Sisera and his army.[240] Beyond this, however, it is notable that such a degrading view of female bodies and lives is put (through Deborah and Barak's lyrical composition) into the mouths of Canaanites. In other words, while (at the outset of the book of Judges) female characters in Israel enjoy a profitable inheritance, lead armies to battle, and slay commanders with nothing more than a tent peg, it is in the mouths of their foreign enemies that women are dismissed as physical commodities.[241]

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238. Ibid., 66. Niditch notes the complexity of Jael's role: she acts as a warrior and also a mother and a lover in her brief but poignant interaction with Sisera.

239. The phrase רחם רחמתים could also be translated "a girl or two for every man" (see Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *BDB*, 933; NRSV also provides this translation). I have chosen, instead, to preserve the sense in which female captives are reduced to their composite physical (specifically reproductive) parts as spoil. See Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 30, for a similar reading.

240. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 82. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 186-87, points out that Jael is a Kenite (a descendant of Moses' father-in-law) rather than an Israelite (Judg 1:16; 4:17). Nevertheless, her allegiance to Israel is clear and as a result she becomes a heroine in Israel in her own right.

241. There is (at least) one more level of significance here. It is women (i.e. Sisera's mother and her female attendants) who reassure one another with the hypothetical scenario in which female captives are distributed as plunder. Granted, this scene is imagined in the minds of Deborah and Barak; nevertheless, it conjures up the all too familiar event in which, faced with desperate inequality, female characters turn against one another (e.g. Sarai and Hagar, Gen 16; Leah and Rachael, Gen 29:31-30:24; the two sex workers, 1 Kgs 3:16-27). See Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes,

Indeed, the military exploits of female characters in the book of Judges are not over: the next (and last) story of agency on the part of an Israelite woman occurs in Judges 9, with the defeat of Abimelech. A cruel and power-hungry judge, Abimelech lays siege to the city of Thebez, whose inhabitants take refuge in a tower. Given that the preceding story relates Abimelech's conquest over the lords of the Tower of Shechem, whom he destroys as they hide in their stronghold, the reader understands the prospects of the citizens of Thebez to be grim. However, just as Abimelech is poised to burn the tower to the ground, a cunning woman emerges with an upper millstone, which she drops with fortuitous accuracy upon the head of Abimelech.[242] In his death throes, Abimelech begs his armour bearer to finish him off, lest the credit for his demise go to a woman.[243] The young man obediently thrusts Abimelech through with a sword, and his troops shuffle off-stage in embarrassment.

This story is ripe with comedic effect: Abimelech, who has been set up as a villain on the cusp of yet another cruel victory, is abruptly (and quite easily) stopped in his tracks by one individual and her creative use of a household object.[244] The reader's amusement is only intensified by the rogue's futile final request: though his armour bearer dutifully finishes him off, the reader is left in no doubt as to Abimelech's actual assassin, nor her unconventional (but successful) method. Thus Abimelech is brought satisfyingly low, and dies amidst fits of embarrassment due to the fact that he is vanquished by a woman. Now, it is important to note that the source of Abimelech's shame is the assumption of inequality: to be killed by a woman is mortifying because women (in the mind of Abimelech) are lesser foes. It is equally significant, however, that this bias is voiced through the mouth of Abimelech, and not the narrator. Indeed, the preceding narratives cast doubt on Abimelech's perspective; only a few chapters prior, Deborah and Jael subdue a much more formidable (male) enemy with equal ease.

Still, there is one important detail that troubles this positive reading of the millstone-wielding female character: she lacks a name. Indeed, every female character to follow—from Jephthah's

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"Mothers and a Mediator in the Song of Deborah," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

242. Bal argues that the setting of Abimelech's murder (a tower, atop of which stands a woman) conjures a sexual metaphor, Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 26.

243. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 118, notes a connection to Saul here, who similarly asks his aide to finish him off lest the Philistine enemy humiliate him (1 Sam 31:4). The request makes more sense from the mouth of Saul, who dreads the cruelty of his enemies; Abimelech fears for his reputation, given that he is bested by a woman.

244. Note that Abimelech kills his seventy brothers upon one stone (על–אבן אחת) and meets his demise at the hands of a "certain woman" (אשה אחת) with a millstone. There is a circular, measure-for-measure justice at play here.

daughter to the concubine—is nameless (the only exception is Delilah, who is not an Israelite). Notably, this trend coincides with the continuing downward spiral of Israel's depravity and departure from following Yhwh. Perhaps this female character's sudden victory over Abimelech is held in tension with her namelessness in a way that is symbolic of the fact that, while there is still hope for Israel, they have already fallen dismally far from their ideal as Yhwh's chosen nation. As we shall see, the trajectory of Israel's deteriorating relationship with Yhwh is closely tied to the dignity afforded to female characters throughout the book of Judges. The woman with the millstone appears at a point in which Israel has already strayed far from the standard imposed by Yhwh (engaging in idol worship and civil warfare; see for example, Judg 8). Perhaps her namelessness is symptomatic of the fragmentation of Israel's relationship with Yhwh, which is integrally connected to the agency of female characters in the book as a whole.

Before going on to consider the next set of stories (the women of the Samson narratives), it is important to note that the story of Jephthah and his daughter falls here, between the woman with the millstone and Samson's mother. As we shall see, this is crucially important for the shape of the book's plot: prior to Jephthah's vow, the stories surrounding female characters in the book of Judges are overwhelmingly positive; from this point onwards, however, Israelite women are nameless, generally silent, and often subjected to violence. Jephthah's vow is featured at a pivotal moment in the narrative and his daughter's death foreshadows the increasingly inhumane treatment of female characters in the stories to come. It is vital that the placement of this narrative (following four stories of strength and prior to the women of the Samson narrative) is not forgotten; indeed, Jephthah's vow serves as a hinge between the stories of Achsah, Deborah, Jael, and the woman with the millstone, and all that is to come.

5.2.2: The Women of the Samson Narrative

The story of Samson's mother proves to be a complicated case: on the one hand, she is addressed and given instructions twice by an angel of God; in addition, she is the voice of reason in response to her husband's somewhat fumbling response to the angel's message. Indeed, as far as the text is concerned, Samson's mother plays a key role in receiving Yhwh's instruction regarding Israel's next judge, bearing the child himself, and sobering up her panic-stricken husband.[245] Nevertheless, in the eyes of Manoah, her word holds little weight and—perhaps as a testament to this fact—she too

245. Yairah Amit, "'Manoah Promptly Followed His Wife' (Judges 13:11): On the Place of the Woman in Birth Narratives," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

remains nameless.[246] Through the eyes of the narrator and the angel of God, Samson's mother is entrusted with considerable responsibility and dignified as the receptor of Yhwh's plan; in contrast, Manoah is not content to take his wife's word as reliable, but insists on procuring his own interaction with the angel.[247] A closer look at the role of Samson's mother and Manoah's actions sheds light upon the trajectory of female agency immediately following Jephthah's vow.

It is significant that the angel of God chooses Samson's mother as witness to his visitation and recipient of his commands on both occasions. Despite the fact that the angel's second appearance is inspired by Manoah's request, the angel still chooses to manifest himself to Samson's mother, and on an occasion when Manoah is not present. The knowledge and actions of Samson's mother with regard to the boy's future are prioritised, whereas Manoah is only included in the conversation on his own insistence and his wife's subsequent choice to involve him.[248] Not only this, but at the conclusion of the narrative—following the angel's departure in the flames of Manoah's offering—it is Samson's mother whose clarity and composure prevents Manoah from spiralling into a state of irrational panic. All-in-all, it is Samson's mother who is portrayed in a positive light, while Manoah appears as her bumbling and witless counterpart.[249]

Manoah himself holds an entirely contrary view of his wife, giving little credence to her role as the recipient of Yhwh's message. Nevertheless, when Manoah presses the angel for further information, the latter simply gestures to all that he has already confided in Samson's mother, apparently confident that she will carry out his instructions (13:12-14). Twice, Manoah misreads the situation: first, with his offer of a meal (which the angel makes clear he will not eat, 13:16), and second, with his request for the angel's name (at which the angel seems genuinely irritated, 13:18). When the penny finally drops and Manoah realises to whom he has been speaking, he is completely undone; it is only the calm reassurances of his wife that restore him to sanity.[250] Indeed, there is a distinct resemblance between the characters of Manoah and Nabal, not simply because they both

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246. Adele Reinhartz, “Samson’s Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

247. Both Webb and Bal gesture to the prophetic aspect of Samson's mother's speech. In recounting the angel's oracle, the wife of Manoah replaces the original promise of Samson's role as saviour with a prediction of his death (13:7), Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 353; Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 31.

248. In Webb's words, "…Manoah is always trying to catch up with his wife, and never quite able to do so," Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 354.

249. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 143.

250. Ibid., 145-46. Niditch insightfully likens Manoah's repeated requests for assurance to those of Moses (Exod 3:11; 4:1) and Gideon (Judg 6:36-40; 7:9-15). In the case of Manoah (and here Niditch draws a parallel with Deborah and Barak as well), "the request motif serves to contrast an insecure, unknowing man with a calm and wise woman."

appear oblivious in the face of power, but because they both overlook their wives' clearheaded and capable role.

The story of Samson's mother comes on the heels Jephthah's vow, and in the midst of Israel's swiftly declining morality. While the angel's words and actions communicate the centrality of her role for Israel's future, Manoah's failure to recognise his wife's capability throws her influence into question. In fact, Samson's mother is the last Israelite woman to be featured in a prominent and positive role in the book of Judges; the importance of the part she plays is undermined, however, by Manoah's disregard. Her husband's less-than favourable treatment is symptomatic of the fact that, with each successive narrative, Israel falls further from their ideal as Yhwh's chosen nation. As with each of the narratives examined here, the story of Samson's mother provides insight into the simultaneous deterioration of Israel's observance of Yhwh's commands and the dissolution of female agency in the book of Judges.

Samson's wife and the prostitute in Gaza feature primarily as pawns in the narratives detailing the judge's exploits.[251] Indeed, Samson's wife functions as the bait that draws Samson into a mutually destructive and ongoing conflict with Israel's Philistine enemy. Caught between two formidable forces, the woman from Timnah is buffeted between Samson's volatile affections and the Philistines' manipulative demands. She (apparently unwittingly) draws Samson into dialogue with his enemies and (with equally little choice in the matter) ignites the fierce rivalry between them. Indeed, given the integral part she plays in the confrontation between Samson and the Philistines, the lack of actual agency afforded to Samson's wife is remarkable.[252] Rather than acting on her own volition, she is taken as a wife for Samson, threatened by her husband's Philistine companions, handed on to Samson's best man as a wife, and finally, killed in the climax of Samson's tit-for-tat battle with his enemies.[253]

Likewise, the prostitute in Gaza acts as a decoy—drawing Samson into yet another scenario from which he marches away triumphant over his enemies. Of course, the woman herself has no choice in the matter; rather, she appears only to be utilised and abandoned (prematurely, in the minds

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251. See Bal, *Lethal Love*, 37-67, for a thorough and convincing analysis of Samson's relationship with each of the key female characters in his tale. Utilising the method of feminist psychoanalysis, Bal explores Samson's relationship with the woman from Timnah, the prostitute of Gaza, and Delilah in turn, ultimately presenting Samson as a hero who is in fact driven by fear: "Fear of the female, the feminine attraction and impurity, fear of initiation, of the first time."

252. Bal views the woman of Timnah, alongside Jephthah's daughter and the concubine of Judg 19, as a paradigmatic example of the confrontation between the might of men and the agency of women in the book of Judges, Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*.

253. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 158.

of her Gazite neighbours, who wait in ambush for Samson to no avail). Indeed, of all the women left in the wake of Samson's turbulent rule, the prostitute fares the worst (at least, in the cases of Samson's wife and Delilah, Samson is said to be motivated by love). The consumption of her body, along with the (apparently more important) relocation of Samson's whereabouts to Gaza, seem to be the only reason for her brief appearance. Both Samson's wife and the prostitute are dehumanised by the role they play, and every party involved (from Samson, to the Philistines, to the inhabitants of Gaza) is complicit in their treatment as such.[254] Only a handful of narratives after Jephthah's fatal vow, the treatment of female characters by both Israel and their neighbours has reached a new low.

In the final story involving a woman in the Samson narrative, however, even Israel's enemies do a better job of recognising and granting the agency of a female character than do Israel (or, at least, the Israelite Samson). Drawn by his love for Delilah, Samson finds himself in close proximity to his enemies, who seize the opportunity to do away with him.[255] Although Samson does not seem to learn from his mistakes (there are many mirrored features between this story and that of Samson's earlier marriage), his enemies do: rather than coercing the woman in question with threats, the Philistine lords engage her as an equal and promise to each pay her a generous sum, should she find the source of Samson's strength. As a result, Delilah (who, not surprisingly—given her prominent and powerful role—is named) is portrayed in a much different light than any of the other female characters who appear after Jephthah's vow.[256] Indeed, Delilah's single-handed conquest of an enemy leader harkens back to the Israelite women who serve as warriors in Israel's battles at the beginning of the book. In fact, the connection between Delilah's role and that of Jael in the death of Sisera is made explicit by the considerable number of details that overlap between the two stories.[257] In both cases a woman (who is not recognised as a threat by the man she hosts) beguiles a feared leader, lulls him to sleep (in both cases, this process involves heavy sexual innuendo), and procures his death,

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254. Even Yhwh is said to have a hand in Samson's infatuation with the woman from Timnah (14:4). This tip from the narrator is held in tension with the fact that Samson has already described the woman as "right in my eyes" (14:3, ישׁרה בעיני); it would seem that Yhwh puts Samson's preoccupation with the Philistine woman to use in Israel's conflict with their enemies.

255. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 119-20, notes that Delilah's nationality is never specified. Her name could have its origin in the Hebrew term לילה (meaning 'night,' nicely juxtaposed with Samson's name, which looks like the root שמש, meaning 'sun'), indicating Israelite decent. However, this reading is complicated by Delilah's cooperation with the Philistines and her willingness to hand over an Israelite hero. One thing is clear: Delilah is depicted as her own entity and with surprising agency given the stories that directly precede her own.

256. Ibid., 119-22. Jackson provides an overview of scholarly opinion on the character of Delilah. Not surprisingly, she is frequently cast as an over-sexualised and dangerous woman, the embodiment of male desire and fear.

257. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 169.

either with her own hands (Jael) or by handing him over to his enemies (Delilah). In order to cinch the ties between these two stories even tighter, an unusual instrument appears in the hands of both women: a (tent or loom) peg. In Jael's case, the tent peg (יתד) serves as the murder weapon; in Delilah's, it is used to bind Samson's locks into a loom. These two women are alike in their actions, but opposed in their allegiance: while Jael secures a victory for Israel, Yhwh's chosen people, Delilah subdues Israel's most formidable judge.

The comparison and contrast between these two women communicates volumes about the deterioration of Israel's morality and (related) conduct towards the women in their midst. While the pre-Jephthah nation of Israel followed a woman into battle and enjoyed more than one victory at the volition of a female character, they are subsequently overcome by their enemies because they (much like Sisera) overlook the power of a woman. Thus Delilah plays an important role in exposing Israel's waywardness, and—in juxtaposition with the Philistine leaders who place their trust in Delilah—revealing how far Israel's treatment of female characters has fallen. Nevertheless, the book of Judges has not yet fully made its point on this matter: the worst is yet to come.

5.2.3: The Final Stories

The final chapters of the book of Judges dredge up the worst of Israel's depravities, all of which (not surprisingly), have repercussions on the treatment of female characters. Even at the outset of the book Israel has fallen short of Yhwh's commands (2:1-3); with Jephthah's vow, their degeneracy picks up momentum, and by the final stories of Judges, Israel's immorality is full-fledged and clearly out of control. This trajectory is a remarkably self-destructive one, not only because it leads to civil warfare and wide-spread bloodshed, but because ultimately—as evidenced by these final stories—it strips away every vestige of dignity hitherto afforded to female characters. True, the first of these four narratives involves a female character with some influence, and yet the end result of her actions only exemplifies the absurdity of Israel's condition, in which (we are reminded again) "everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6, אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה). With the ensuing (and final) three narratives (the concubine, the 400 virgins, and the daughters of Shiloh), the morbid reality of Israel's perversion is made inescapably clear, and the dehumanisation of female characters is full-fledged.

The story of Micah's mother (who is never given a name of her own) is brief and strange. Apparently she is at the mercy of her son's whim, which leads him first to steal money from her, and later to restore it. Still, upon receiving the stolen silver from her son, Micah's mother turns it into a household god, which (we are later informed) remains as an object of worship in Israel for a considerable period of time (18:31). Both the exchange between Micah and his mother and her

subsequent actions are odd and somewhat absurd, and perhaps this is the point. Israel has strayed so far from their ideal as Yhwh's chosen people that they are content to worship an idol formed on an impulse, in the midst of a domestic dispute. Whether or not Micah's mother exercises any real autonomy in this exchange is secondary to the pervading tone of the text here, which highlights first and foremost the complete lack of any guiding morality amongst the people of Israel. This reality is played out in excruciating detail over the course of the remaining narratives.

The very next story involving a female character begins on a similar note: with a domestic quarrel between a Levite and his concubine. This narrative, too, features absurdity, as the Levite is repeatedly (and inexplicably) coaxed by his father-in-law to delay his journey home and, instead, spend day after day in drunken revelry. Finally, the Levite summons his resolve and departs with his concubine, and the humour of the text dissolves into horror as the pair (along with a servant and a pair of donkeys) find themselves in an unfamiliar Israelite city at nightfall. The unbridled immorality of this Israelite community is mapped onto the brimstone-inducing depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah as the men of Gibeah demand to have sexual relations with the visiting Levite. In fact, both the Gibeonites and their Levite guest emerge looking much worse than their Sodomite counterparts: while the latter are held at bay by a pair of angels, the Levite seizes his concubine and hands her over to a crowd of riotous men, who rape her throughout the night. The text spares no grisly detail here: the woman collapses at daybreak with her hands outstretched toward the threshold of the house in which the Levite remains untouched. Having apparently already forgotten the events of the night before (and the woman who suffered in his stead) the Levite steps out in the morning to continue his journey home, only to find his concubine on the doorstep (the text is intentionally ambiguous, at this point, as to whether she is alive or dead). He proceeds, upon arriving home, to dismember her and distribute the fragments of her body around the twelve tribes of Israel.[258]

The point, of course, is clear: in a book that has charted the precipitous descent of Israel's integrity, the severity of their moral failure by the final chapters is portrayed in damning detail. The inequity and horror of Jephthah's daughter's death is the beginning of a downward spiral that leads to the disregard of female characters (at best) and the violent degradation of their bodies (at worst).[259] Jephthah's fateful vow foreshadows the careless dehumanisation of female characters that follows as a repercussion of Israel's abandonment of Yhwh's instruction in favour of their own impulses. The final two narratives, in which female characters are, en masse, the subject of brutality and

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258. Ibid., 194. Niditch sees the treatment of the concubine as representative of Israel's political fragmentation: "The woman is a visceral symbol of Israel's body politic, anticipating the way in which Israel is to be torn asunder by the civil war that follows her murder."
259. Ibid.

oppression, serve only to further emphasise this dismal reality.

In response to the Levite's distribution of his concubine's body, Israel rallies under the pretext of fervent (though inane) justice, and decides that the tribe of Benjamin (in which the city of Gibeah is located) must be decimated in retribution. A blow-by-blow account of a mutually destructive civil war ensues, the result of which is six hundred Benjamite warriors—all that is left of their tribe—cowering in the wilderness. The rest of the congregation of Israel, in a now-familiarly absurd change of impulse, are cut to the heart over the fate of their Benjamite relatives and seek to undo the devastation they have wrought by procuring wives for the survivors. Their apparent altruism, however, results only in further bloodshed and terror. The inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead are put to the sword, all except four hundred virgins, who are captured and delivered to the men of Benjamin as wives. As if the repeated slaughter and abduction of their own kindred is not enough, the men of Israel persist in their problematic pursuit of that which is right in their own eyes, determined to provide wives for the remaining two hundred men of Benjamin. Thus the daughters of Shiloh, who emerge unsuspecting from their homes to dance during a time of feasting, are snatched up and carried away to serve this purpose. By the end of the book, the people of Israel are caught in a cyclical pattern, by which they engage in self-destructive behaviour and then, in an attempt to set things right, succeed only in inflicting further damage.[260] Caught in the midst of this impetuous behaviour, female characters are subject to sexual abuse and violence—objects to be used, stolen, and traded at will.

It is worth noting the interconnectedness of the Jephthah narrative and these final stories, particularly the account of the women taken as wives for the surviving Benjaminites.[261] In both cases, a vow or oath is made prior to war (11:30-31, 21:1); following the ensuing battles, the repercussions of each pledge are realised and ultimately lead to violence against women. Alongside broad thematic similarities, Wong identifies shared language between the two texts: key vocabulary used to describe Jephthah's daughter (בתולים, בת and לא–ידעה איש) is picked up and reused to depict the daughters of Jabesh-gilead and the virgins of Shiloh. In addition, Jephthah's daughter dances (מחלות) to meet her father before her untimely death; the women of Shiloh similarly dance (מחלות), unaware of the fate

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260. Ibid., 208. Niditch suggests that—despite multiple accounts of violence against women—the book of Judges ends on a harmonious note, with the men of Benjamin rebuilding their homes and the tribes of Israel returning to their respective territories (Judg 21:23b-24). I would argue, however, that the weight of chaos and violence conjured up by the final chapters of the book is not so easily shrugged off; rather, the book's final line ("everyone did what was right in their own eyes," 21:25) brings the book to an uneasy conclusion, which provides no resolution for the abject injustice of the final stories.

261. See Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 132-35, and Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 71.

that awaits them. The significance of these allusions, according to Wong, is to reveal that the "bizarre" behaviour of the final stories of Judges have precedent in the earlier judge cycles.[262] I would add to this interpretation a more specific purpose for the echoes of Jephthah's daughter and her fate: these final, dismal scenes harken back to the fulfilment of Jephthah's vow, which served as a tragic turning point for female characters in the book of Judges.

As already demonstrated, the wellbeing and dignity (or lack thereof) of female characters serves as a finger on the pulse of Israel's broader morality in the book of Judges. In the book's first chapters, the conquests of Joshua are fresh in the people's minds and initially (though only briefly) they are motivated by Yhwh's instruction as they enter the land. Not surprisingly, the female characters who are featured in these early narratives are powerful figures, who are dignified and even honoured by their male counterparts. It does not take long, however, for Israel to slip further into lawlessness, at which point Jephthah's vow and subsequent sacrifice of his daughter acts as a marker of things to come and a tipping point, from which the ensuing stories of female characters are blighted by oppression and cruelty. The gruesome nature of these final stories makes the twofold significance of the book as a whole inescapable: Israel, in choosing to do what is right in their own eyes rather than follow Yhwh's instruction, are caught in a self-destructive spiral that highlights with particular clarity the resulting cruelty inflicted on female characters.

5.3: Jephthah's Vow

The story of Jephthah and his daughter occurs in the middle of the book of Judges. It is framed on either side by mirrored accounts of the judges who precede and follow Jephthah's rule, both of whom are memorable not because of their deeds, but because of the rate at which they proliferate. Prior to Jephthah's arrival on the scene, Jair the Gileadite makes a brief appearance; though he is said to have judged Israel for twenty-two years, no mention is made of his conquests, or how he came to be Israel's judge. Instead, the number of his sons (and their donkeys)—thirty in all—is all the information provided, along with the fact that his sons possessed thirty cities. This account is both concise and odd, and makes little sense until it is considered in conjunction with the judge whose rule directly follows Jephthah's: Ibzan of Bethlehem, with his thirty sons and thirty daughters. Again, the number of his offspring is deemed the only detail worth sharing about Ibzan, though he judged Israel for seven years.[263] Indeed, the significance of both accounts lies more in the tidy

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262. Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 131.

263. There are also connections between the account of Jair and that of Abdon, who is listed shortly after Ibzan (12:8-15). The former is said to have forty sons and thirty grandsons, all of whom ride on seventy donkeys.

framework that they create around the pivotal story of Jephthah, than in any particular contribution that either judge made during his time in power. The mirrored descriptions of Jair and Ibzan and their extensive families serve primarily to draw attention to what (or whom) comes between.[264] The memorable detail of each judge's thirty sons catches the reader's attention, both before and after the Jephthah story, and creates an inclusio that further highlights the centrality of Jephthah's vow for the book's plot as a whole.

Much has been stated and debated about the motivation behind Jephthah's vow.[265] Certainly the obscurity behind this detail—as an intentional literary technique—creates tension and drama at this climactic moment in the book's plot.[266] And perhaps this is the point: as the people of Israel continue to do that which is "right in their own eyes" (17:6, אישׁ הישׁר בעיניו יעשׂה), Yhwh's oversight fades into the background and the characters are left to fend for themselves in their definition of

264. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 81-83, 99, notes the placement of the Jephthah narrative between accounts of minor judges. Klein posits that brief descriptions of minor judges are interjected in the midst of the narratives of Judges in order to provide an "interlude"—a moment for the reader to catch their breath—between the intensity of stories like those of Abimelech and Jephthah.

265. Ibid., 95-96. Klein presents a Jephthah that is out-of-touch with Yahwist religious rites and who therefore incorporates the foreign practice of child sacrifice into his own religious practice. Levenson, *Beloved Son*, 14, and Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 133, take a different view altogether, arguing that child sacrifice does in fact have a place in Yahwist practice and suggesting that Jephthah's vow is an example (along with Gen 22 and 2 Kgs 3:26-27) of this precedent. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 329-32, suggests that—in the heat of the moment prior to battle—Jephthah thinks little of his daughter's life and attempts to bribe Yhwh in order to secure a victory, a decision that he later regrets when face-to-face with his only child.

266. Fuchs argues that the ambiguity of the Jephthah story serves to obscure the judge's mistake, while simultaneously sidelining his daughter's dire position, Esther Fuchs, “Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993). I would argue, however, that Jephthah's culpability is made inescapable by the dramatic and downward turn of narrative events immediately following the fulfilment of his vow.

good from bad.[267] Nevertheless, there are clues (subtle as they may be) as to the integrity (or lack thereof) of Jephthah's actions. To begin with, his response to the Spirit of Yhwh is unusual; second, the uniquely long apodosis of his vow troubles the notion that Jephthah made his pledge unthinkingly. In addition to this, the grief conjured up by the text surrounding his daughter's death is palpable and, finally, the progression of Jephthah's rule following the fulfilment of his vow is telling. Each of these understated cues combine to cast Jephthah in a less-than-favourable light.

The Spirit of Yhwh is said to descend on Jephthah prior to his conquest of the Ammonites (11:29). Jephthah is not the only recipient of this empowering presence: Othniel, an earlier judge, is equally equipped prior to a battle with the king of Mesopotamia (3:10); Gideon is supplied (literally "clothed," לבשה) with the Spirit prior to conquering Israel's enemies in the Valley of Jezreel (6:34); Samson receives the same help against the Philistines (14:19); and Saul, facing the same enemy as Jephthah (the Ammonite forces), is descended upon by the Spirit of Yhwh (1 Sam 11:6). Jephthah's response to this aid, however, is different from that of each of these other warriors (apart from Gideon); while they move swiftly to victory, Jephthah stops to bargain.[268] The Spirit of Yhwh comes upon Jephthah (an instant clue of his imminent success) and in the next verse he utters his vow in an attempt to strike a deal with Yhwh and secure his support. The ambiguous terms of Jephthah's vow aside, this is a strange move: the help of the Spirit usually acts as a linchpin in any dispute, no matter how formidable. Still, Jephthah's tendency, as the rejected son of a sex worker (surrounded by a motley crew of criminals), to assure his own welfare by means of haggling has already been demonstrated. When approached by the elders of Gilead, who promise to instate him as their leader following his victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah is not content to take them at their word. Rather, he insists that the elders confirm their promise to give him leadership over their people three times before he is content to fight on their behalf (11:6, 8, 10).[269] Needless to say, this tendency to bargain (particularly when it comes to negotiating with Yhwh) casts doubt on Jephthah's integrity as Israel's judge.

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267. This phrase is a repeated and significant mantra throughout the book (e.g. 17:6, 21:25).

268. See Gadala, "Analysis of Vows in the Book of Judges," 66-67; Bernard P. Robinson, "The Story of Jephthah and His Daughter: Then and Now," *Biblica* 85, no. 3 (2004), 340; Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 96. It should be noted that Gideon acts on a similar impulse and bargains with Yhwh (6:36-40). A notable difference between the stories of Gideon and Jephthah, however, is the frequency with which Yhwh interacts with Gideon, in contrast to the absence of Yhwh's explicit direction or involvement in Jephthah's case. See Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 89-90, on contrasts and commonalities between these two judges.

269. Note again allusions to Gideon here, who requires three assurances from God before battle (6:36-40).

In addition to this, it is worth noting the uniquely lengthy apodosis in an analysis of Jephthah's vow, which includes the first, third, and fourth elements of the votive formula. To begin with, the surrounding narrative provides us with the context from which the asseveration is motivated (the first characteristic of a vow): Jephthah prepares to lead Israel into battle against the Ammonites and calls out to God for help. Although the introductory material informs the reader that Jephthah calls out to Yhwh, the judge does not explicitly address the deity in his vow (the second characteristic). On the condition that God grants him victory over the Ammonites (protasis), Jephthah promises to sacrifice the first thing to meet him upon his return home (apodosis).[270] Cartledge organizes each part of this vow according to his formula:[271]

(1) And Jephthah vowed a vow to Yahweh, and he said:
(2)
(3) 'If you will surely give the sons of Ammon into my hand,
(4) then it will be that the one who comes out from
the doors of my house to meet me when I return
in peace from the sons of Ammon,
he will belong to Yahweh,
and I will offer him as a burnt offering.'

The apodosis of this particular vow is lengthy, yet Jephthah's promise is clearly stated in the fact that he will sacrifice what- or whomever is first to welcome him home. The details provided in the additional clauses simply concern when and how this promise will be fulfilled.[272] It is ironic, however, that the apodosis of Jephthah's vow is generally considered to be evidence of a lapse of judgement on the judge's part, despite the fact that it is one of the longest and most specific of all votive apodoses in the narrative of Hebrew Bible. Indeed, Jephthah mentions the doors of his home as the specific context, his return from battle as the particular timeframe, and burnt offering as the designated method for his vow to be fulfilled. Whether or not the judge had any notion of how his vow would ultimately be enacted, the specificity of this final element of the votive formula complicates the idea that Jephthah did not think through the terms of his vow.

Not only are the terms of his vow troublingly precise, but the details provided in the

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270. See Robinson, “The Story of Jephthah and His Daughter,” 333-34, for a summary of stories out-with Hebrew Bible that revolve around a pledge similar to Jephthah's, in which the first to greet a hero after conquest is dedicated as a sacrifice. Examples abound, including the account of Agamemnon and his daughter Iphigeneia; Idomeneus, the king of Crete, who strikes a deal with Poseidon, which results in the near-sacrifice of his own son; and Alexander the Great.
271. Cartledge, *Vows*, 146-47.
272. Ibid., 147.

fulfilment of Jephthah's pledge cast a gloomy shadow over his victory. Upon the judge's return from battle and the emergence of his daughter at the head of a celebratory procession, the pace of the narrative slows down considerably, further highlighting the painful interactions between father and daughter. To begin with, the text provides background information: this daughter is Jephthah's only child; this information—combined with Jephthah's agonised outcry—lead the reader to believe that she is particularly loved by her father.[273] Jephthah explains his vow to her, and his daughter's response only underlines the anguish of this moment.[274] Rather than fighting or fleeing, Jephthah's daughter accepts her fate as the victim of Jephthah's fateful vow, but requests the right to spend two months in mourning, roaming the mountains with her companions. The shift of narrative attention from Jephthah and his conquest to his daughter and her prolonged period of lamentation is significant: the focal point of this story is no longer the judge's victory, but the tragedy of his daughter's unnecessary death.[275] Without explicitly condemning Jephthah's vow—whether through the mouth of a fellow character or Yhwh himself—the text portrays its fulfilment in mournful rather than approving tones.[276]

Finally, the trajectory of Jephthah's rule from this point onwards is not a positive one. Immediately following the sacrifice of his daughter, Jephthah is caught up in civil warfare and leads the men of Gilead to slaughter tens of thousands of their Ephraimite brothers. This self-destructive cycle has occurred before (8:16-17; 9:5-57) and it will occur again (ch 20-21); the mass murder of fellow Israelites by their own people is never a good sign, indicating instead the drastic departure of the nation from Yhwh's oversight. Indeed, the book of Judges ends on this sordid note, with a long

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273. Nevertheless, both Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 101, and Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 95-96, point out that Jephthah is the subject of his own grief ("Alas my daughter, you have brought me low," 11:35); Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 332 similarly observes, "He calls her *my daughter* but offers her no solace; only accusation." See also Robinson, “The Story of Jephthah and His Daughter,” 341, and Peter F. Lockwood, “Jephthah’s Daughter: Awake to Her Wicked Father (Judges 11:29-40),” *Word & World* 40, no. 3 (2020), 215.

274. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 102, notes that Jephthah offers "neither solace nor release," comparing the judge's speech with that of Abraham, who reassures Isaac that God will provide (Gen 22:8) or David, who longs to die in his child's stead (2 Sam 19:1).

275. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 326.

276. It is worth noting that Saul's curse in 1 Sam 14:24 and subsequent oath against the life of Jonathan (14:44) resembles Jephthah's vow: the aim of both leaders is military victory, in both cases their emphatic statements place the life of their own child on the line. In Jonathan's case, the troops make a counter-oath to Saul's and prevent his son's untimely death. This precedent would suggest that Jephthah had other options (for example, according to Targum Jonathan of the Prophets, had Jephthah consulted with Phinehas the priest, the latter would have instructed him to substitute an animal sacrifice for the life of his daughter, Tg. Neb. Judg 11:39. See Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 134-35. Exum disagrees, pointing to the power of Jephthah's vow, by which he is

and gruesome account of the near-obliteration of one tribe at the hands their Israelite brothers. These concluding narratives depict an Israel that is blinded by their own definitions of what is good and glutted on their own immorality. The brief but sombre account of civil conflict at the end of the Jephthah account foreshadows this later catastrophe, and places Jephthah in the ignoble company of Israel's leaders who incite bloodshed amongst their own people.[277]

It is important to note that, prior to his vow, Jephthah's career as Israel's judge (albeit brief) was hopeful. Despite bartering the conditions of his leadership with the elders of Gilead, Jephthah proceeds to confront the king of the Ammonites with an account of Yhwh's direction and provision for the people of Israel.[278] This, in combination with the subsequent matter of the Spirit of Yhwh imbuing Jephthah as he embarks for battle, are entirely in his favour. The tables are turned, however, the moment that the judge utters his unnecessary and ruinous vow; Jephthah's victory is mentioned succinctly, but it is the repercussions of his vow on the life of his daughter, and the disastrous end of his rule, that predominate the remainder of his account.[279] Not only does Jephthah's vow function as a pivotal moment in the narrative of the judge himself, but it operates as a turning point at the book's most climactic moment, from which the narrative plunges downhill through repeated accounts of Israel's waywardness. This downward spiral is foreshadowed by Jephthah's vow and exemplified, in part, by the ongoing and prolific acts of violence against female characters throughout the remainder of the book.

Further emphasis is placed on Jephthah's vow as a turning point in the treatment of female characters by an informative connection between this story and that of Caleb and his daughter Achsah at the very beginning of the book (1:11-15). The broad allusions between these two narratives position them in stark contrast to each other: a father makes a promise (in Caleb's case, this is not an emphatic statement—an oath or a vow—but simply a spoken agreement); both men offer up their daughters on the condition of victory (Achsah as a wife, Jephthah's daughter as a sacrifice); and both daughters subsequently make a request of their fathers. Though the parameters of

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bound to sacrifice his daughter, J Cheryl Exum, “On Judges 11,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

277. This notable (and repeated) failure on the part of those in authority over Israel is not limited to the book of Judges. For example, Saul's decision to kill the priests at Nob is equally damning of his leadership career (1 Sam 22:6-19).

278. See Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 89, and Lockwood, “Jephthah’s Daughter,” 213, on the flaws of Jephthah's version of Israel's history in Judg 11:15-27.

279. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 107, sees Jephthah's subsequent victory over the Ephraimites as a sign that the story has moved on without further thought for his daughter; Jephthah's end, in Trible's view, is a happy one, despite the injustice of his daughter's demise. However, the fact that Jephthah's career ends with disastrous civil war is hardly complementary.

each story are remarkably similar, their conclusions diverge drastically. Achsah approaches her father with apparent confidence and asks (almost demands) a profitable inheritance of land, while Jephthah's daughter—facing the prospect of an early and cruel death at the hands of her father—asks instead for the opportunity to grieve her virginity. The stark difference between the fate of these two women highlights the deterioration of female agency thus far, and anticipates the continual disintegration of all dignity afforded to female characters throughout the remainder of the book.

As an extension of this thought, it is worth considering Jephthah's daughter's response to her father's vow as an element of foreshadowing. Given her role as victim in this account, it is perhaps surprising that Jephthah's daughter is given the chance to speak at all, let alone make a request and (as the fulfilment of that appeal) spend two months in the company of her friends, mourning her own untimely death. However, given the import of this particular narrative for the book as a whole—both in terms of Israel's deteriorating morality and, more specifically, the increasing dehumanisation of female characters—the response and actions of Jephthah's daughter should not be overlooked. Indeed, the narrative pauses at a critical moment, amidst an account of Jephthah's woeful error, and provides his daughter with space to grieve the violence committed against her.[280] In fact, the length of time that she is allowed to mourn, the fact that she does not do so alone, but in the company of other women, and the repetition with which this lamentation occurs (even after her death), suggests a broader significance.[281] Perhaps, in the wake of Jephthah's disastrously decisive vow and in anticipation of all that it signifies (not only for his daughter, but for the female characters still to come) the grief of these women foreshadows the cruel treatment of their sisters at the hands of an obdurate Israel. The establishment of this custom as a yearly ritual amongst the women of Israel only underlines the far-reaching implications of their lament for the narratives to come.

5.4: Conclusion

The repercussions of Jephthah's vow are far-reaching and profound. Not only is the previously optimistic portrayal of the judge himself abruptly undermined, but the narrative trajectory of the book as a whole is changed fundamentally from this point onwards. True, Israel is no stranger to moral failure prior to Jephthah's arrival on the scene, but the fulfilment of the judge's cruel vow acts as a confirmation and a continuation of the nation's increasing depravity. From this point

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280. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 135, observes, "The daughter, although unnamed, speaks her mind and creates her own ritual, albeit fully within the contours of a particular patriarchal system that she is portrayed as supporting." See also Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 106-07.

281. Exum notes, "Jephthah's daughter finds life through communal recollection…The recounting of the daughter's courage and the women's refusal to forget is not just a balance to, but a transcendence of the tragedy of the daughter's death." Exum, “On Judges 11,” 132.

onwards, female characters are treated with little or no dignity, and the book's shocking conclusion serves only to underline the destructive progression of Israel's waywardness, particularly on the lives of Israelite women.

The profundity of Jephthah's vow on the orientation of the book as a whole can only be fully appreciated with a thorough exploration of each narrative (involving one of more female characters) and its relation to the judge's pledge. Upon closer examination, it quickly becomes apparent that the Jephthah narrative falls between four stories of remarkably powerful women, and eight ensuing accounts of female characters who are largely overlooked and frequently the subjects of cruel violence. Rather than being accidental, the narrative's placement here serves as a marker, drawing readers' attention to the increasing absurdity of Israel's own definition of what is right, and the horrific repercussions of this misplaced morality on the agency of female characters. The second half of the book, following Jephthah's vow, serves only to play out this reality with increasingly grisly detail.

Neither his fellow characters, nor Yhwh himself, provides any explicit condemnation for Jephthah's vow and fulfilment thereof. However, the fact that Jephthah is not satisfied with the arrival of the Spirit of Yhwh to his aid, but instead stops to barter with Yhwh, is not in his favour. Similarly, the tone of the narrative following his vow changes abruptly; though his victory over the Ammonite forces is briefly mentioned, it is the sad events surrounding the death of his daughter and the subsequently disastrous end to his rule that become the focal point of his story. Not only do these features suggest that the judge's vow is sadly misplaced and wrongfully fulfilled, but they underline the devastating effect of his daughter's death for the book's plot as a whole. It is the resulting and continuing dehumanisation of female characters from this point onwards that is foreshadowed by the ritual weeping instituted by Jephthah's daughter and her companions.

Once again, the critical importance of an emphatic statement as a literary device is readily apparent. Rather than setting the tone for an entire story (like Ruth's oath), or identifying particularly important characters (like Abigail's), Jephthah's vow appears at a climactic moment in the plot's progression, communicating volumes about Israel's departure from Yhwh's oversight and foreshadowing the downward spiral of the nation's self-destructive definition of what is good. As is often the case, the significance of this particular vow and its repercussions for the narrative as a whole are most clearly seen in the depiction of female characters.

Hannah: Vows & Annunciations

She made this vow: "O Yhwh of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your maidservant and remember me, and not forget your maidservant but give to your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to Yhwh all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head."

ותדר נדר ותאמר יהוה צבאות אם ראה תראה בעני אמתך וזכרתני ולא תשכח את אמתך ונתתה לאמתך זרע אנשים ונתתיו ליהוה כל ימי חייו ומורה לא יעלה על ראשו׃

6.1: Introduction

The influence of emphatic statements on the warp and weft of a narrative is, at this juncture, quite clear. Ruth's oath is fundamental to her story; arguably, without it, we would have no story at all—no expectations to be fulfilled, no metric by which to measure each character in turn. Similarly, without Abigail's oath, we would have a different story altogether: David's trajectory has suddenly and dangerously veered from its true course and it is only Abigail's timely oath that sets the story back on track and preserves David's reputation as exemplary king. Jephthah's tragic vow is equally vital for the shape of the book of Judges, providing a sharp turning point in the narrative and initiating a downward spiral that culminates in the book's grisly conclusion.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are riddled with emphatic statements, from Hannah's momentous vow at the outset to the reoccurring oaths spoken throughout the tumultuous careers of Saul and David.[282] Given the proliferation of this particular literary device throughout the narrative, it is no surprise that 1 Samuel begins with a portentous vow, which—much like Ruth's oath—serves as a metric by which Hannah herself and all of her fellow characters are measured. In fact, much has been said with regard to the import of Hannah's song on all that comes after—a point certainly worth making—but little note has been taken of Hannah's equally pivotal vow or the integral role it plays in the introductory scenes of the book.[283] Indeed, 1 Sam 1-2 presents itself as a richly informative case

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282. Of the five vows that occur in the narratives of Hebrew Bible, two occur in the books of 1 and 2 Sam respectively (1 Sam 1:11 and 2 Sam 15:8, see Cartledge, *Vows*, 162-98). In her formative monograph on oaths in Hebrew Bible, Ziegler chooses the books of 1 and 2 Sam as a case study, punctuated as they are with emphatic statements. Ziegler identifies ten oaths spoken by or with regard to Saul, and thirty-four in the narratives of David, Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 151-88.

283. See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, "1 Samuel 1: A Sense of a Beginning," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102, no. 1 (1990), 42, and Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 273. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63-87, notably overlooks Hannah's song *and* dismisses her vow, an oversight that leads to considerable flaws in his argument. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 1, seems at first to miss Hannah entirely: in

study not only because the reverberations of Hannah's vow are felt throughout the rest of the story, but because Hannah is the only female character throughout all of Hebrew Bible narrative to speak a vow.

This chapter will approach the narrative of 1 Sam 1-2 from two angles, beginning with an examination of the fabric of this story: characterisation, intertextual allusion, subversion. In aid of this first step of narrative analysis, Alter's application of the type scene convention to 1 Sam 1 will be used as an informative (albeit problematic) backdrop. Alter's work in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* is illuminating and has rightly been formative in his field; unfortunately the misapplication of his annunciation type scene to the introductory scene of 1 Sam creates fundamental flaws in his reading of the text. A particularly crucial oversight is Alter's dismissal of Hannah's vow as the babbling and inarticulate speech of a "simple, sincere country wife."[284] Alter's misreading of the vow renders this pivotal moment of the text opaque and impoverishes his analysis of the character of Hannah and her place at the outset of the book. Although the use of Alter's annunciation type scene provides a helpful entry point into the narrative of Hannah's vow, the most important insights into Hannah's character and the significance of her pledge emerge at points of disjunction between the type scene and the text of 1 Sam 1.

The latter section of this chapter focuses in on the intricacies of her vow, which serve to underline the import of Hannah's role already brought to the fore through broader narrative analysis. Breaking Hannah's vow into its composite parts and mapping these on to Cartledge's vow formula highlights the unique elements of her pledge, which in turn further exemplify her role as paragon at the outset of the book. Here again we find Alter's analysis to be lacking: at the very point at which he finds Hannah's words incoherent, her speech in fact adheres perfectly to the expected vow formula. Indeed, Hannah's vow is the only example in Hebrew Bible that fulfils every element of this formula, including an address to the deity, which in all other cases is implicit. Once again we are reminded that a robust understanding of the form and function of emphatic statements in Hebrew Bible yields a wealth of information on the characters who speak them and the narratives they shape.

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the initial lines of his commentary on Samuel's birth story, Miscall notes the introduction of the story's main characters and places, which he lists as Samuel, Eli, Hophni, Phinehas, Saul, and Shiloh and Ramah. It is hard to imagine how Hannah's name could be omitted from this list; as the rest of this chapter will show, her role is crucial for the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

284. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 84.

6.2: Rereading the Annunciation Type Scene in 1 Samuel 1

The identification of type scenes as a reinterpretation of repeated narrative episodes, previously catalogued as stutters in source transmission, is enormously helpful. With this move, Alter reimagines the creativity and intentionality behind the text, opening the door to long-forgotten points of resonance and composite meaning.[285] Texts that previously were read as redundant due to their repetition are, through Alter's intuitive rereading, seen in light of their correspondence to one another. This methodological shift reinvigorates the possibilities of narrative analysis and fundamentally alters the interpretative landscape.

The type scene convention proves faulty, however, when it is too rigidly applied.[286] If and when the proposed convention overshadows and dictates the interpretive possibilities of a text, just as much is lost as is gained in the way of analytic discoveries.[287] In the case of his reading of 1 Sam 1, Alter relies heavily on the expectations set up by the annunciation type scene, ultimately to the detriment of his understanding of the nuances of this text and their significance. What follows is an identification of the textual details that lead Alter to categorise Hannah's story as an annunciation type scene in the first place, a look at the expectations that are set up by this classification, and (most importantly) an examination of the points at which 1 Sam 1 diverges from the annunciation precedent.

Among the key characteristics of the annunciation type scene identified by Alter are barrenness, enmity between wives, and a husband's favouritism.[288] In addition, Alter highlights the important role that is played by each male child whose birth is preceded by the aforementioned details.[289] Finally (and crucially, for our analysis of Hannah's story), the annunciation type scene

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285. Ibid., 50-51. In his presentation of the type scene as a literary convention Alter draws from the work of Walter Arend, who first identified the technique in Homeric poetry.

286. As Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 365, observes, "Analogy is an essentially spatial pattern, composed of at least two elements (two characters, events, strands of action, etc.) between which there is at least one point of similarity and one of dissimilarity: the similarity affords the basis for the spatial linkage and confrontation of the analogical elements, whereas *the dissimilarity makes for their mutual illumination, qualification, or simply concretization*" (emphasis mine).

287. It should be noted that Alter does acknowledge the importance of deviations between two narratives that employ the same type scene; in his analysis of 1 Sam 1, however, he overlooks these informative discrepancies, Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 181.

288. Ibid., 85. See also Jenni Williams, “Hannah: A Woman Deeply Troubled,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, ed. Keith and Benjamin J. M. Johnson Bodner (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 45-46.

289. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 85, identifies one exception to this rule: in his view, the birth of the Shunamite woman's son (2 Kgs 4) is preceded by the necessary features of an annunciation, but the child himself has no important role to play thereafter.

frequently includes an oracle spoken to one or both expectant parents. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, for example, the prediction is spoken to Abraham by one of the three mysteriously divine visitors who sit outside Sarah's tent (Gen 18:10):

I will surely return to you in due time, and Sarah your wife will have a son.

שׁוב אשׁוב אליך כעת חיה והנה בן לשׂרה אשׁתך

Each of these features appear in various combinations throughout the stories of matriarchs and patriarchs in the book of Genesis. It is here that the origin story of Israel is depicted in a collection of narratives that are formative for the nation and foundational for all that is to come. It is no surprise, then, that we encounter a concentration of textual details (the basis for Alter's annunciation type scene) along the way that point to Yhwh's intervention in and creation of a lineage. The limitations of barrenness, old age, and marital strife emerge as obstacles through which to highlight the divine power and intention behind the births of Israel's fathers. Of course, equally vital to this story are the nation's mothers: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and their less-loved counterparts, Hagar, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah. The former three are beloved and barren, the latter four bear sons without hindrance but are unloved. Sarah treats Hagar cruelly when the latter conceives a child with Abraham; Rachel and Leah's relationship is fraught with strife as a result of Rachel's barrenness and Jacob's favouritism. Despite these obstacles (all of which are features of Alter's annunciation) the fathers of two nations are born, in preparation for which Sarah, Hagar, and Rebekah are each recipients of divine oracles.

The features of Alter's annunciation type scene are not limited in their occurrence to Israel's origin stories in the book of Genesis, however. Samson's mother is barren but receives an oracle concerning the birth of her son, who goes on to play a key role in Israel (Judg 13). The Shunamite woman in 2 Kngs 4 has borne no sons but, in return for her hospitality, Elisha prophesies that she will give birth in due season. Other Hebrew Bible narratives play subtly with this convention: Tamar's barrenness is not due to her own physical limitation but to the wickedness of Judah's sons; Ruth is married ten years without bearing children, which throws into question her ability to conceive (or Mahlon's ability to procreate). The theme of barrenness is picked up with artful subtlety in these two narratives in order to instigate narrative tension and tug on the knowledgeable reader's expectations: where conception is humanly impossible, divine intervention (or, in some cases, human guile) is to be expected as a remedy. Additionally, in almost every case a momentous career is forecast for the miraculous child.

The narrative of 1 Sam 1 is yet another example that prompts and plays with the features of this convention. Hannah, of course, is barren; nevertheless, Elkanah views her with particular fondness. Peninnah, Elkanah's more generative wife, scorns Hannah's childlessness. These (now familiar) tensions evoke a sense of anticipation regarding the longed-for child whose providential

birth will save the day. Samuel's arrival and the notable role he plays in the formation of Israel's kingship leave these expectations entirely fulfilled. At face value, the annunciation type scene has been employed once more with a predictable outcome: a male child is born out of a fractious home and barren womb to play a formative role in the evolution of Israel's story. It is at this particular interpretive moment that Alter's proposed convention, once identified, must fade into the background or risk overshadowing and obscuring the text itself.[290]

The most pithy of textual moments are often to be found exactly where a story diverges from the convention it employs.[291] After all, to what better end are a reader's expectations carefully arranged than to be overturned without warning? Just as the reader is lulled into a sense of assurance as to the predictability of the narrative arc stretching out before them, the rug is abruptly pulled from beneath their metaphorical feet and they are jolted awake to unforeseen conclusions. The surprising omission or addition of detail in the midst of an otherwise formulaic sequence of events uncovers interpretive gems for the cognisant reader. Here Alter's type scene meets its limits: when applied too rigidly, the predictability of the convention muffles points of dissonance along the way, thereby muting a text's most informative details. Although Alter highlights this subversive possibility in his initial explanation of the biblical type scene and its characteristics, he fails to effectively analyse crucial points of divergence between Hannah's story and the annunciation type scene.[292] Three key differences emerge: Elkanah's role is unexpectedly peripheral, Hannah does nothing to engage in conflict with Peninnah, and no oracle is spoken to predict the birth of Hannah's child. The omission of each of these anticipated details serves only to underline the textual features that take their place instead (Hannah takes the central role, her integrity is highlighted, and her agency becomes clear in the fact that—in the absence of an oracle—her vow introduces and defines Samuel's role). Each of these unique features will now be considered in turn in order to highlight the distinctive role played by Hannah and her vow in 1 Sam 1.

The first line of the text introduces the quasi-heroic husband, Elkanah. Granted, at the moment of his appearance the key features of an annunciation have not been presented; as soon as

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290. In the words of Williams, “Hannah,” 47, "…Hannah shares a problem with Sarai, Rachel, Manoah's wife, and others. But if we (a) limit our view of her to this one problem or (b) allow the type to constrain us so that we miss valuable aspects of the character, the reading experience is impoverished."

291. Ibid., 52. Williams aptly observes, "…the point at which the type becomes most valuable is when it breaks down. As such, one of the type's great contributions to narratology is essentially apophatic. When a character flexes away from the constructed type, something is to be inferred about authorial intent. The type cannot be said to be subjective, but neither is it objective and it must be sacrificed to gain the full richness of what the story has to offer."

292. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 48-49.

the scene has been set, however, with Hannah the beloved but barren wife and Peninnah her fertile but cantankerous counterpart, Elkanah's role is ripe with readerly expectation. The particular details of Hannah's barrenness and the domestic tensions between her and Peninnah immediately cue two other prominent annunciation stories: the schemes of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Gen 16 and the fractious relations between Jacob, Rachel and Leah (and Jacob's concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah) in Gen 30. As we have already seen, each of these stories revolve around the key problems of barrenness, favouritism, and antagonism between co-wives and concubines. As the threads between 1 Sam 1 and these two preceding annunciation scenes are tightened, the expectation that Elkanah (like Abraham and Jacob before him) will feature as a prominent patriarch is implicitly established. No sooner has the significance of Elkanah's role been forecast, however, than it is swiftly unraveled. Rather than patriarch, Elkanah functions as pawn in this story: his role is primarily to initiate yearly trips to Shiloh and to 'know' (ידע) his wife at the opportune moment.[293]

Precedent has been set elsewhere for the underwhelming role of a husband in an annunciation type scene.[294] In contrast to Samson's mother, who is twice visited by a divine messenger and entrusted with an oracle predicting her son's birth and career, Manoah is a bumbling foil (Judg 13). His own bafflement in response to the angel's direct and patient instruction serves to highlight the clear-headed and willing response of Manoah's wife. In this instance (just as in the case of shrewd Abigail and her fool of a husband, Nabal), the hyperbolic nature of a husband's obliquity dramatises his ineptitude while elevating his wife's importance. But Elkanah's lack of prominence is less dramatic than Manoah's—the part he plays is not even remarkable enough to function as his wife's foil. Perhaps more like the Shunamite woman's husband in 2 Kngs 4, Elkanah's role is simply

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293. Ibid., 82. Alter does acknowledge the underwhelming role played by Elkanah. In fact, he goes as far as designating 1 Sam 1 as a "a matriarchal story"; nevertheless, when it comes to his analysis of Hannah's character, Alter is woefully dismissive. Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 22-26, on the other hand, sees Elkanah's words to Hannah ("Am I not worth more to you than ten sons?" 1:8) as reflective of Yhwh's response to Israel's desire for a king, an interpretation that elevates Elkanah's contribution. For this argument to stand, however, an explanation would need to be given for Elkanah's peripheral position throughout the narrative. More importantly, Polzin does not deal with Hannah's vow, questioning instead the virtue of her request for a son (which he maps on to Israel's request for a king). Although his proposal that 1 Sam 1 serves as a "parable" for the broader themes of 1 and 2 Sam is an intriguing one, Polzin's interpretation is impoverished by his oversight with regard to Hannah's vow. Williams, “Hannah,” 53, pushes back on the view that Hannah—in her request for a son—is representative of Israel in their request for a king. "…Hannah as one who ignores human help and seeks the divine will is rather what Israel should have done (at least according to 1 Sam 8) and didn't do." See also Adele Berlin, “Hannah and Her Prayers,” *Scriptura* 87 (2004), 228, on the peripheral role played by Elkanah.

294. In fact, Amit notes that the father often fades into the background of a biblical birth narrative, examining the stories of Moses, Samson, and Samuel as case studies. Amit attributes the centrality of the mother-figure to the fact that "The woman who gives birth is considered to possess creative

peripheral, despite (and in direct contradiction to) the expectations set up at the outset of the story in connection with the characters of Abraham and Jacob.[295] Along with their wives, Abraham and Jacob play definitive roles (for better or worse) in their own stories. True, both men recede into the background almost entirely in their respective annunciation scenes (Jacob makes no protest when Leah hires him for the night with her son's mandrakes, nor does the righteous Abraham hesitate to follow Sarah's instruction to sleep with Hagar). Nevertheless, as patriarchs of Israel the characters of Abraham and Jacob are fleshed out in more detail over the course of an extensive narrative; Elkanah, in contrast, appears only here as Hannah's loving and dutiful husband—he has no story of his own.

The diminutive role of Elkanah is only the first point of subversion in this story. Along similar lines, the juxtaposition of a cherished but barren wife with a fruitful but less-loved one opens up two narrative possibilities, based on previous precedent: likely, these wives will view one another as rivals; quite possibly they will embroil their female servants in the feud. Bitter rivalry is a key component of two annunciation scenes mentioned above: Sarah treats Hagar cruelly and Rachel and Leah seek to outdo one another in their conception of sons. In both cases, prior to (or in place of) divine provision, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah all take the dubious step of enrolling their servants as concubines. The connections drawn between the initial details of 1 Sam 1 and the stories of Sarah, Rachel, and Leah introduce the expectation that Hannah and Peninnah will engage in bitter rivalry or resort to questionable means in order to secure the birth of a longed-for child. Once more, these expectations are overturned when—despite Peninnah's provocation—Hannah refuses to engage in conflict with her co-wife.[296]

When confronted with the reality of her barrenness, Sarah takes matters into her own hands and makes the dubious choice to offer Hagar to Abraham as a vessel through which to bear a child. Sarah's plan and Abraham's acquiescence result in Hagar's dehumanisation, the jeopardisation of God's covenant promise, and (not surprisingly) discord between the two women. This enmity is initiated by Sarah's treatment of Hagar as a possession to be handed over to her husband, sexually abused, and left to carry a child on behalf of her mistress. It is no wonder that, upon conceiving the child that Sarah has longed for, Hagar is bitter and retributive. Sarah in turn chastises Abraham, who

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power similar to that of God the Creator," Amit, "'Manoah Promptly Followed His Wife'," 156. Nevertheless, the allusions that occur between Samuel's birth story and those of Israelite forefathers raise the expectation that Elkanah will play a more substantial role.

295. The Shunamite woman's husband is even less remarkable than Elkanah. He is old (2 Kgs 4:14) and unaware (4:23); he is not credited with his own wealth (4:8) nor even his son's conception (in place of the usual phrase, 'he knew his wife and she conceived,' the text simply states that the Shunamite conceived, with no mention of her husband's participation in the event).

296. Williams, "Hannah," 46.

gives Sarah permission to mistreat her slave. Familial tensions reach a crescendo and Hagar flees to the wilderness to escape Sarah's cruelty. A precedent is set in the rivalry of these two matriarchs that will emerge again, with doubled intensity, as the narrative continues.

The fact that Leah is given to Jacob in Rachel's stead instigates immediate tension: Leah is unloved while Rachel is the sought-after reward for Jacob's years of hard labour. The plot only thickens with Rachel's barrenness and Leah's fertile womb; the women compete for their husband's love and his progeny, ultimately embroiling their own slave women into the feud. Thus the discordant relationship between wives is repeated and the tragic subjection of Hagar is mirrored twofold in the fate of Bilhah and Zilpah. Both narratives are fraught with the rivalry and suppression of wives and concubines who, in response to discrepancies between the love they receive and the children they bear, strive against one another.

It is due to the prevalence of familial strife in these two formative narratives that Alter classifies enmity between wives as a key feature of the annunciation scene.[297] Nevertheless, despite a plethora of narrative cues that suggest the repetition of this theme in 1 Sam 1 (Hannah's barrenness, Peninnah's fertility, Elkanah's favour and Peninnah's provocation), Hannah is exemplary in her refusal to engage in rivalry with Peninnah or to resort to cruelty in pursuit of progeny.[298] Given the well established precedent of enmity as a result of barrenness, Hannah's restraint is all the more remarkable and definitive. Indeed, it is not only Hannah's forbearance in the face of Peninnah's harassment that sets her apart (i.e. what she does not do), but equally the actions and words with which she responds to her circumstances (i.e. the agency she does take).[299]

Hannah's first and only move towards gaining the child she longs for is to make not only a request but a reciprocal pledge to God. This is perhaps the most notable feature of Hannah's story and one that (not surprisingly) hones our attention in on the pivotal moment of her vow. In almost every other case, the birth of an anticipated son is preceded by an oracle spoken by a divine messenger and foreshadowing the child's arrival. Spoken by an angel or prophet, these oracles communicate one (or more) of the following four details: the timing of the child's birth, the name

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297. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 85.

298. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 36, observes, "Hannah seeks no relief for her pain in insisting to Peninnah, for example, on her husband's preference for her; on the contrary, she eats nothing of the special portion given to her as a token of his love. At the festive table, Peninnah triumphs."

299. Williams, “Hannah,” 55, notes, "…Hannah does not respond either to Peninnah's mocking or Elkanah's rather petulant reassurances. Her silence in the narrative is hugely significant. It allows the author to portray her as someone who knows her own aloneness in this family and then to show that this is not the place where she needs to deal with her problem: unlike Rachel who reproached Jacob (Gen 30:1) and begged Leah for help (Gen 30:14), Hannah's first speech will be to God."

they should be given, the role they will fill, and/or instructions for the expectant mother. Leah, Rachel, and Hannah are the only women in annunciation scenes not to receive an oracle—in every other case, the spoken words of a divine messenger play a central role in the introduction and definition of the life of the unborn child(ren).[300]

Despite the fact that she considers it a laughable prospect, Sarah is promised a son by one of the three mysterious visitors to her tent (Gen 18:10). This brief oracle predicts the birth of her son and provides an (albeit vague) timeline for his birth ("in due time," כעת חיה). Just a few verses prior, Abraham also receives an oracle predicting his son's birth, giving the child a name, and anticipating his role as one with whom God's covenant will be established (Gen 17:19). In combination, the words spoken to Sarah and Abraham, which foreshadow many of the details of Isaac's birth and life to come, play a formative role in this narrative (the first of our annunciation type scenes).

In Hagar's case, the oracle is spoken after the conception of her child, a subtle cue to the fact that Abraham's acquisition of Hagar marks a divergence from the original plan already communicated to the patriarch and his wife. In response to the injustice of Abraham's actions, a messenger of Yhwh appears to Hagar in the wilderness and predicts the birth and career of the son she carries (Gen 16:11b-12):

> Behold you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for Yhwh has given heed to your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live alongside of all his kinsmen.
>
> הנך הרה וילדת בן וקראת שׁמו ישׁמעאל כי שׁמע יהוה אל עניך: והוא יהיה פרא אדם ידו בכל ויד כל בו ועל פני כל אחיו ישׁכן:

Here Ishmael's birth is predicted (Hagar is already aware that she is pregnant but unaware that she carries a male child), his name is given and his unruly role is defined. Just prior to speaking this oracle, the divine messenger also gives Hagar instructions to return to her mistress (Gen 16:9). As is always the case when an oracle is spoken in the midst of an annunciation type scene, the angel's predictions and instructions play a pivotal role in initiating action, foreshadowing the future, and providing revelations into a narrative's characters (not unlike an oath or vow).

The oracle spoken to Rebekah likewise occurs after conception, but this time in response to Rebekah's desperate appeal to Yhwh as her two sons wrestle within her womb (Gen 25:23):

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300. The omission of an oracle in the stories of Leah and Rachel could lead to a number of conclusions. Most convincing in my mind is the possibility that the voice of the expected divine messenger is veritably drowned out by the sisters' feud, which takes over the narrative of Gen 30. Their respective statements of triumph after the birth of each son perhaps take the place of the anticipated oracle(s): their sons are named and the state of their conflict (which takes greater precedence here than the roles their sons will take) is redefined.

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.

שׁני גיים בבטנך ושׁני לאמים ממעיך יפרדו ולאם מלאם יאמץ ורב יעבד צעיר׃

Once again, the oracle—this time spoken directly by Yhwh—predicts the birth of two children (like Hagar, Rebekah is aware that she is pregnant but possibly unaware that she carries twins) and their respective futures. Rebekah learns that her children will form two nations, that their relationship with one another will be a divisive one, and that the older of the two will be subservient to the younger. Whether or not this prognosis is intended to bring Rebekah comfort is uncertain; either way it plays an important role in the narrative of Esau and Jacob's conception and birth, but also in the trajectory of their far-reaching legacy.

There is only one example in which the annunciation oracle is spoken by a prophet rather than a divine being: Elisha's brief speech to his Shunamite host (2 Kngs 4).[301] Elisha's words conjure up the words spoken to Sarah in Gen 18:10, which are similar in content and brevity (2 Kngs 4:16):

At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.

למועד הזה כעת חיה אתּa חבקת בן

The Shunamite's response also bears resemblance to Sarah's: in apparent unbelief or lack of hope she entreats the prophet not to deceive her. However, unlike Isaac (and every other child born from an annunciation scene), the Shunamite's son remains unnamed for the entirety of his story and plays a comparatively peripheral role. Granted, his short story is an eventful one: born despite his mother's barrenness, he dies an untimely death only to be raised to life again by the same prophet who predicted his birth. In classifying the story of the Shunamite and her son as an annunciation type scene Alter acknowledges the anomaly of the boy's unremarkable career; likely an examination of the noteworthy divergences between the narrative of 2 Kngs 4:8-37 and other scenes that employ the annunciation convention would lead to interpretive gems.[302] For now, it is enough to note (once again) that the oracle precipitates action and gives some definition (this time with reference to timeline) to the child's arrival.

Samson's mother is recipient to perhaps the most lengthy of oracles pertaining to the birth of her son. In this case the divine messenger not only predicts her son's birth but gives detailed instructions for both mother and child, which in turn define Samson's future role as a Nazarite and Israel's deliverer (Judg 13:3b-5):

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301. It is worth noting that the role of divine beings and prophets is elsewhere seen to be interchangeable (compare, for example, Judg 2:1-3 with 6:7-10).

302. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 85.

> Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazarite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.
>
> הנה נא את עקרה ולא ילדת והרית וילדת בן: ועתה השמרי נא ואל תשתי יין ושכר ואל תאכלי כל טמא: כי הנך הרה וילדת בן ומורה לא יעלה על ראשו כי נזיר אלהים יהיה הנער מן הבטן והוא יחל להושיע את ישראל מיד פלשתים:

Not only is the oracle spoken to Samson's mother thorough and detailed, but it is given (at Manoah's request) twice. The second iteration is more concise and simply reiterates the instructions given to Samson's mother without restating the particularities of Samson's role (Judg 13:13b-14). The latter have already been heard and understood by his mother; apparently Yhwh's messenger feels no need to rehearse them again for Manoah. The purpose of the oracle in Samson's annunciation scene is manifold: not only does it initiate the action of his conception and birth, but it also delineates the expectations (and therefore later successes and disappointments) of his role. Not only this, but it fleshes out important differences between Samson's mother and father, which in turn are informative in the broader narrative of the book of Judges (see Chapter Five).

The oracle, as we have seen, plays a crucial role in the annunciation type scene. The theme of barrenness invites divine intervention, and that intervention is routinely preceded by the annunciation of the unborn child's birth and future legacy. Naturally, upon learning of Hannah's barrenness the knowledgeable reader anticipates divine interruption: first in the form of an oracle and then—predictably—in the provision of conception and the birth of a male child. Indeed, at just the narrative turn when one would expect the intervention of a divine or prophetic figure, the priest Eli appears on the scene. In deep distress, Hannah separates herself from the gathering of her family and seeks Yhwh's presence (cue Hagar and Rebekah), at which point the narrative thrums with expectation. Eli, we learn, is poised propitiously at the doorway of the temple; the otherwise odd detail of his exact location conveniently guarantees that their paths will cross.[303] At this point it seems a foregone conclusion that Hannah will indeed be met with the anticipated oracle and that it will be spoken by the priest who is fortuitously awaiting her arrival at the temple. Hannah's vow disrupts this expectation—instead of being the recipient of an oracle, Hannah's own words initiate her son's arrival—and when Eli does speak, the forecast narrative becomes further disillusioned. Eli's words are harsh and incoherent with the narrative events to this point (1 Sam 1:14):

> How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.

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303. J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1-12)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), 34, notes that while Hannah rises (ותקם), Eli's sits (ישב): "The syntax renders him a figure on the sidelines of Hannah's initiative."

עד מתי תשתכרין הסירי את יינך מעליך׃

Eli, the anticipated messenger of a divine oracle, is revealed to be completely unaware and even misguided.[304] His rebuke (even more abrupt in contrast to the expected oracle) is not without purpose: not only does his misplaced advice provide a gap that is conveniently filled by Hannah's vow, but it also exposes the priest's lack of character and connection with Yhwh.[305] Presumably (based on Elisha's precedent in 2 Kngs 4), had Eli been aware of Yhwh's plans a divinely articulated oracle would have slipped from his lips upon first encounter with Hannah.[306] Instead, Eli is out of touch with his role and responsibility as priest (a fact that is made explicit in 1 Sam 3-4), while Hannah—in contrast—models humble devotion to Yhwh.

Hannah's vow, then, provides perhaps the most significant jolt to the predictability of the annunciation type scene: at the moment when a divine messenger would usually appear with reassurance, Hannah instead makes an impassioned plea and promise to Yhwh. Remarkably, it is Hannah's words that initiate the birth of her son and outline the role he will play. In fact, Hannah does not simply request a son and thereby instigate his arrival, she takes the additional step (here echoing the voice of the angelic messenger in Judg 13) of providing instructions for the boy's way of life (1 Sam 1:11):

> O Yhwh of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will give him to Yhwh all the days of his life, and no razor will come on his head.
>
> ותדר נדר ותאמר יהוה צבאות אם ראה תראה בעני אמתך וזכרתני ולא תשכח את אמתך ונתתה לאמתך זרע אנשים ונתתיו ליהוה כל ימי חייו ומורה לא יעלה על ראשו׃

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304. See Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 77, and Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1-12)*, 41. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 36, notes that the reader gains unusual insight into Hannah's internal struggle prior to her interaction with Eli. "This mode of description, in which much information is conveyed to the reader as to Hannah's inner world, her reason for being in the sanctuary and even what she says in her silent prayer, testifies against Eli, who sees but does not comprehend as he ought, and so berates her." See also Berlin, “Hannah and Her Prayers,” 230-31, who notes "This is the first time, but not the last, that Eli is slow to realise that someone close to him is in communication with God."

305. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel*, 36-37, points out that in her response to Eli, Hannah implores him not to take her for "a daughter of *Belial*" (בת–בליעל, usually translated "a worthless woman"). Eli did not explicitly accuse Hannah with this term, but Garsiel notes a connection to a later description of Eli's sons, who are "sons of *Belial*" (בני בליעל, which JPS translates "scoundrels"). "By these equivalent definitions the implied author guides the reader into comparing Eli's approach to Hannah with his approach to his sons—which results in a yet lower estimate of him, for he rushes to call Hannah a 'daughter of Belial' but cannot see that his own sons are behaving like 'sons of Belial' both in the sanctuary and in the district." See also Williams, “Hannah,” 55, Klein, *1 Samuel*, 9, and Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 27 on the use of this term in Hannah's speech.

306. Following Hannah's appeal, Eli sends her away with the statement, "Go in peace, and may the

The MT fleshes out these instructions further to include abstinence from strong drink and the explicit definition of Samuel's role as a Nazarite.[307] In either case, Hannah makes the surprising and unprecedented move of not only requesting a child in the face of barrenness but also deciding and prescribing the role he will play.[308] All of this is accomplished by her vow, the conditional (if…then) structure of which lends itself to the request for a son and the pledge of his future.

The marked divergences between 1 Sam 1 and the expected features of Alter's annunciation type scene are, by now, unavoidably clear. Elkanah fades into the background almost as soon as he is introduced—despite precedent for his patriarchal role—while Hannah steps to the fore. Though Peninnah goads her, Hannah refrains from engaging in a domestic feud, thus making obsolete an expected source of narrative tension and highlighting her own integrity. No sooner has her upstanding character been revealed than Hannah takes the momentous step (anticipated in the form of divine oracle) of precipitating the birth of her son and defining the role he will play. Not surprisingly, Alter's reading of a "simple, sincere country wife, desperate in her barrenness" is deeply problematised upon a closer reading of this text.[309] While the type scene convention plays an initial role in outlining expectations at the outset of a narrative, it overshadows the nuances (and key points of meaning) when read as prescriptive for the story.[310] The most glaring omission in Alter's reading is his dismissal of Hannah's role as peripheral and unimpressive, an oversight that not only impoverishes his reading of 1 Sam 1 but, in light of Hannah's paradigmatic contribution to the whole, inhibits any possibility of a thorough analysis of 1 and 2 Sam in its entirety. It is only when the clear discrepancies between the type scene and the text in question are recognised for their interpretive import that the prominence, virtue, and faith of Hannah's character can be fully realised. Not surprisingly, this new insight into the narrative of 1 Sam 1 and Hannah's unique role not only throws into question Alter's dismissive reading but, more importantly, reshapes the interpretive possibilities of this pivotal text on all that is to come.

God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him," (1:17). Williams, “Hannah,” 46, observes, "If Eli's pronouncement at 1 Sam 1:17 is a prophecy or a guarantee of divine blessing, the birth announcement we would expect from this type-scene is stunningly inexplicit."

307. This detail cues a connection to the Samson story, which is examined in more detail in the following section.

308. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 8.

309. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 84.

310. As Williams, “Hannah,” 58, concludes, "The story of Hannah is the story of someone in need, someone victimized but someone with courage and a deeply grounded sense of theological truths. Much of this story is the story of others in the Old Testament. But it is also uniquely hers."

6.3: A Closer Look at Hannah's Vow

As already established in the previous section, Hannah's vow marks a momentous turn in the narrative of 1 Sam 1. At the very moment in which the reader expects the voice of an angelic messenger or prophet, Hannah's voice instead introduces her son's role and initiates movement to the plot of 1 Sam as a whole. In conjunction with her song, Hannah's vow plays a fundamentally important role in launching the action of 1 Sam and establishing a precedent by which every other character to follow will be measured. With her vow, Hannah exemplifies the principle established by her song: those who exert their own power will be brought low, while the weak who look to Yhwh will be uplifted.[311] The significance of Hannah's role (i.e. why she takes centre stage, displays remarkable restraint, and speaks her own vow in place of the expected oracle) is considered in more detail in the conclusion of this chapter; for now, it is pertinent to look closely at the details of Hannah's vow. As has been the case with each of the emphatic statements analysed already, the power of an oath or vow extends down through every word included (or excluded) from the expected formula. Hannah's vow is no exception: her direct address to the deity and her incorporation of the complex Nazarite pledge speak volumes about the paradigmatic role she plays at the outset of the book.

Perhaps the most tragic oversight in Alter's analysis of Hannah's character is his designation of her vow as "artless" and "naive."[312] In reality, Hannah's pledge conforms directly to the expected blueprint; in fact, Hannah's is the only vow in Hebrew Bible to explicitly fulfil every element of the vow formula. This formula, as identified by Cartledge, is as follows:[313]

1. Narrative introduction
2. Address to the deity
3. Protasis of the vow (condition)
4. Apodosis of the vow (promise)

The fulfilment of each of these pieces is helpfully distinguished and arranged by Cartledge as well:[314]

1. and she vowed a vow, and she said,
2. 'Yahweh Sebaot!
3. If you will truly look upon the affliction of your maidservant,
   and remember me,

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311. See Chapter Four for an analysis of David and Abigail's actions in light of the precedent set by Hannah's vow and song.
312. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 84.
313. Cartledge, *Vows*, 145.
314. Ibid., 147-48.

and will not forget your maidservant,
and will give to your maidservant a male child,
4. then I will give him to Yahweh all of his days,
and a razor will not come upon his head.'

In the case of every other vow spoken in the narrative of Hebrew Bible, the direct address to Yhwh is left implicit. For example, Jacob's vow takes the following shape:[315]

1. and Jacob vowed a vow, saying,
2.
3. 'If God will be with me,
and will watch over me on this journey I am taking,
and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear,
and will return me in peace to the house of my father,
4. then Yahweh will be my God,
and this stone which I have set up for a pillar will be a house of God,
and of all that you give to me, I will surely give a tenth to you.'

Likewise Jephthah, Israel, and Absalom in their respective statements leave the direct address to the deity unspoken. The fact that Hannah calls on Yhwh of hosts directly in her speech suggests that she is not a babbling fool; on the contrary, her words display courage and clarity. Not only does Hannah initiate her son's life and role with her bold vow, but her speech demonstrates the belief that Yhwh is a true source of help for the needy (an idea further expounded in her song). Thus the words of her request and pledge are purposeful, bold, and clear.

Now, it is worth noting that Alter's impression of the meekness of Hannah's speech is not entirely unfounded. Hannah's repeated self-designation as 'maidservant,' along with her twofold request that Yhwh 'remember' and 'not forget' serve to underline both her vulnerability and Yhwh's response. The precedent set by Hannah's character and song is solidified in her vow: with her repeated identification as Yhwh's maidservant, Hannah underlines her own powerlessness and need for divine intervention. Hannah sets a subversive precedent at the outset of a book about Israel's kings: those who are mighty will be brought low, but those whose lot is held in Yhwh's hand will remain secure. Hannah's humble faith is the mark that sets her apart as an exemplar for all who follow after.

Likewise, the repetition of Hannah's request that Yhwh 'remember' her plight is much more than a foible in her speech. Rather, Hannah's repeated request highlights the significance of Yhwh's

315. Ibid., 146.

response in 1 Sam 1:19b-20:

> Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and Yhwh remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named his Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of Yhwh."
>
> וידע אלקנה את חנה אשׁתו ויזכרה יהוה: ויהי לתקפות הימים ותהר חנה ותלד בן ותקרא את שׁמו שׁמואל כי מיהוה שׁאלתיו:

As Brueggemann has noted, the anticipated sequence of Elkanah knowing his wife and her conceiving is interrupted by the important detail that Yhwh remembered Hannah.[316] Keeping in mind that Hannah takes a central role (in place of divine messenger or prophet) in foreshadowing and defining her son's future, this detail serves as a reiteration of the fact that Yhwh hears and responds to Hannah's initiative. Hannah asks (twice) to be remembered and the text goes out of its way to confirm that Yhwh responds directly to Hannah's request.

The very characteristics that lead Alter to a dismissive view of Hannah's character (particularly the repetitions of her speech) are in fact key textual details that solidify the importance of her role. It is worth mentioning too (and here again we encounter the limits of the type scene convention) that an appraisal of Hannah's speech as "artless" and her character as "simple" does not only require a misreading of her vow. In addition, one must entirely ignore her song just a few verses later in 1 Sam 2. Critics have acclaimed Hannah's song as powerful, formative, and crucial for an understanding of the rest of 1 and 2 Sam.[317] The beauty, complexity, and authority of Hannah's song immediately problematise a dismissive reading of her character. Ultimately, the narrowed scope of the type scene convention can lead to the exclusion of vital information and thereby fundamentally compromise a textual interpretation.

Before concluding an analysis of Hannah's vow, it is important to note one more informative detail: the Nazarite element of her pledge. The final line of Hannah's vow in the MT ("and no razor shall come upon his head," ומורה לא יעלה על ראשׁו) is expounded upon in Septuagint ("…I will set him before you as a nazarite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head"). Following the definition of the Nazarite vow in Num 6, there are no other narrative examples in Hebrew Bible of this pledge being volunteered; indeed Samson and Samuel are the only characters to take on Nazarite status and neither of them comply by the

316. Brueggemann, "1 Samuel 1," 37; Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 21; J. P. Fokkelman, "Desire Divine: Poems—pillars—pivots," in *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, ed. Keith and Benjamin J. M. Johnson Bodner (London: T&T Clark, 2020); Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 30-36.

317. See Brueggemann, "1 Samuel 1," 42; Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 78-81; Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1-12)*, 73-111; Berlin, "Hannah and Her Prayers," 231-32; Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 273.

instructions given in Num 6.[318] Interestingly, in both cases the Nazarite status is either prescribed to or volunteered by the character's mother. In the case of Samson, as we have already seen, a divine messenger provides instructions to Manoah's wife and reveals that her son will be a Nazarite from birth (Judg 13:4-5). To this end, Samson's mother is instructed to abstain from strong drink and unclean foods; as for the boy, "no razor shall come upon his head," (ומורה לא יעלה על ראשו).

This phrase is repeated word-for-word in Hannah's vow, in which she defines the life her son will live. These stories allude to one another in more ways than one, the implications of which are further expounded in this chapter's conclusion.[319] For now, it is worth noting that Hannah volunteers this Nazarite pledge and is the only character in Hebrew Bible to do so. Once again, Hannah's strength and devotion are exhibited clearly by the force and implication of her vow. True, Hannah volunteers this pledge on behalf of her son—it is his life that she consecrates by means of her vow—she does not take on Nazarite status herself. Nevertheless, in the case of Samson's mother, it is clear that her son's designation as a Nazarite has implications for her own way of life: at least for the period of her pregnancy, she is required to refrain from consuming anything that comes from the vine or is unclean (Judg 13:4, 14). Whether or not this amounts to her own Nazarite status is unclear (although Num 6 makes clear that both women and men can take the Nazarite vow). No mention is made of a razor touching her head, nor (and this omission is notable in both Judg 13 and 1 Sam 1) the need to avoid contact with the dead. Perhaps Samson's mother is simply required to refrain from imbibing in any way that might compromise her son's status while in the womb; either way, it is clear that she too is implicated in the designation of her son's Nazarite distinction.

Although the text does not make this explicit, the details of 1 Sam 1 reveal that Hannah, too, takes on the implications of her son's role as a Nazarite even before he is conceived. Not only does she volunteer her son as a Nazarite, but the nuances of this narrative suggest that Hannah herself is already fulfilling her own role as it is outlined in the instructions given to Samson's mother.[320] Without being instructed to do so by divine oracle, Hannah has not consumed strong drink; there may even be an argument to be made that she has not eaten anything unclean (given that the text repeatedly reaffirms the fact that, due to her grief, she has abstained from food in general). This latter point is more nebulous, but the first is made clear in Hannah's exchange with Eli the priest. This interaction carries with it a wealth of implication: not only does it undermine Eli's priestly role

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318. Citing Amos 2:11-12, Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 143, sees Nazarite status (when prescribed by God) as "a sign of divine favor, a boon from God to certain male heroes who manifest prophetic and other forms of charismatic leadership."

319. See also Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 12-13, and Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 24.

320. Ibid., 27; Berlin, “Hannah and Her Prayers,” 229-30.

(despite readerly expectation of a divine oracle, Eli offers a misplaced rebuke), but it emphasises Hannah's integrity and forethought. Immediately following Hannah's pivotal vow and as she continues to pray in the temple, Eli berates her for what he perceives as drunkenness (1 Sam 1:14):

> How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.
>
> עד מתי תשתכרין הסירי את יינך מעליך׃

Eli's reprimand is abrupt in the face of Hannah's sincere prayer, but it does more than expose his own lack of perception. The priest's oversight provides opportunity for Hannah to clarify a detail that the reader, until this point, did not realise was integral to the story (1 Sam 1:15, emphasis mine):

> No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; *I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink*, but I have been pouring out my soul before Yhwh.
>
> לא אדני אשה קשת רוח אנכי ויין ושכר לא שתיתי ואשפך את נפשי לפני יהוה׃

In a moment of artful subtlety, the text communicates an abundance of useful information: Eli is incapable of fulfilling his role as divine interceptor, instead he demonstrates woeful lack of insight. Hannah, on the other hand, speaks her own oracle in the form of a vow and does not need to be instructed as to her own participation in the Nazarite pledge—she already exemplifies this commitment with her sobriety and devotion.[321] In abstaining from strong drink, Hannah exhibits both upstanding character (particularly in contrast to Eli's perception of her as an intoxicated troublemaker) and preparedness for her role as the mother of a Nazarite. Before Samuel is yet born or consecrated to God, Hannah herself has separated and set herself apart for divine purpose.

To conclude, a closer look at Hannah's vow sheds light on the paradigmatic role that she plays. Her boldness and devotion is exemplified in the fact that she alone among all speakers of vows in Hebrew Bible makes a direct address to the deity. The humility of her speech identifies her as the type of character that is acknowledged and honoured by Yhwh, as is later detailed in her song.[322] Even the seemingly unnecessary repetition in her speech serves a specific and significant purpose: with the duplication of Hannah's request that Yhwh remember her plight, Yhwh's response underlines the fact that he hears and is motivated by Hannah's vow. Finally, the Nazarite dimension of Hannah's vow sets her apart as the only character in Hebrew Bible narrative to volunteer Nazarite status. The text makes clear that Hannah speaks this pledge not only on behalf of her future son, but also on a personal level: as the expectant mother of a Nazarite son (and indeed, even before this son is conceived) Hannah demonstrates the same kind of self-denial that is required of Samson's mother

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321. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1-12)*, 44.

322. As already noted, Hannah's song is both powerful and prophetic and further exemplifies her role as divine messenger. For the literary significance of her song, see Polzin, *1 Samuel*, 30-36, who argues for a connection between 1 Sam 2 and 2 Sam 22: "Hannah's initial song and David's final hymn of praise form a poetic *inclusio* for the history contained within the books of Samuel."

in her own pregnancy. The notable difference, of course, is that Hannah preemptively takes on these requirements of her own accord and in faithful preparation for the fulfilment of her vow.

6.4: Conclusion

Although a perusal of 1 Sam 1 with the type scene convention in mind draws informative allusions between this text and other annunciation scenes, the most pertinent details emerge in the discordances. Of these, as we have seen, there are many. The question becomes, then, what do all of these divergences between associated texts communicate about Hannah and her unique role? And how does her vow feature in this portrayal? Analysis of Hannah's character often leads to premature interpretations of Samuel's role, before adequate time or attention has been given to the volumes communicated about Hannah herself and the implications of her actions—not only on Samuel's future—but on her own place as exemplar in this story.

In his conclusion to the study of 1 Sam 1 as an annunciation type scene, Alter's final reading of Hannah's character is predictably dismissive. On the one hand, Alter views Hannah's despair as a fitting introduction to Samuel's under-appreciated role as Israel's leader:[323]

> The barren mother's bitterness is given unusual prominence in this version—perhaps, one might conjecture, because it is a thematically apt introduction to the birth of a lonely leader whose ultimate authority the people will finally circumvent to establish the monarchy against which he warns.

In other words, Hannah's role is to foreshadow the grim realities that her son will face as Israel's overlooked and ultimately rejected leader. For Alter, it is Hannah's "bitterness" that takes centre stage, rather than her courage or devotion. In this reading Hannah appears as nothing more than a spectre of the foreboding future that awaits her son: her ultimate contribution is a bleak one.
Just a few lines later, however, it is not Hannah's bitterness but her obscurity that Alter reads as formative for Samuel's portrayal. In combination with Eli's gormless response, Hannah's inaudible prayer serves as a foil for her son's powerful and prophetic role in Israel. Samuel's authority, then, comes directly from Yhwh and places him in stark contrast to the unremarkable characters of his origin story. Alter's argument on this point begins with the subversion of Eli's role and is worth quoting in full:[324]

> This oblique undermining of Eli's authority is of course essentially relevant to the story of Samuel: the house of Eli will be cut off, his iniquitous sons will be replaced in the sanctuary by Samuel himself, and it will be Samuel, not his master Eli, who will hear the voice of God distinctly addressing him in the sanctuary. The idea of revelation, in other words, is paramount to the story of Samuel, whose authority will derive

323. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 85-86.
324. Ibid., 86.

> neither from cultic function, like the priests before him, nor from military power, like the judges before him and the kings after him, but from prophetic experience, from an immediate, morally directive call from God. For this exemplary figure of prophetic leadership, Hannah's silent, private prayer and the obtuseness of the well-meaning priest who superfluously offers himself as intercessor between her and God provide just the right kind of annunciation.

What emerges here is the central idea that Samuel is unique in his distinction from Israelite leaders who precede and follow his rule. According to Alter's reading, there is no precedent set for this kind of authority, which incorporates the jurisdiction of priest, judge, prophet, and king, and certainly no hint of it in his lowly mother or disappointing high priest. On the latter point I would agree with Alter: Eli is set up as foil and as evidence of the need for new leadership in Israel. I would argue, however, that Eli is first and foremost a foil for Hannah. Indeed (and here the differences between Hannah's story and every other annunciation scene speak the loudest), it is Hannah—not Samuel—who first outshines the rest of Israel's leadership.[325] With the employment of the annunciation scene Hannah is juxtaposed with patriarchs and matriarchs, priests and prophets, judges and kings; in every case it is Hannah that emerges as paragon and long before her son's arrival on the scene. To repurpose Alter's words: it is Hannah who first takes on a "morally directive call from God" and who serves as an "exemplary figure of prophetic leadership."[326]

When juxtaposed with the stories of Abraham and Sarah, or Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, Hannah's refusal to engage in bitter rivalry with Peninnah stands in stark contrast to the matriarchs before her. Not only this, but Hannah makes no recourse to embroiling a maidservant in the affair, though she might be expected to do so given the parallels between her story and those of Sarah, Leah, and Rachel. Hannah's prominence alongside Elkanah's fleeting role only heightens the significance of the part she plays—the expected patriarch dwindles into the background while Hannah steps forward in contrast with initiative, foresight, and faith. The parallels drawn between these initial annunciation scenes and 1 Sam 1 throw into stark contrast Hannah's restraint and integrity, as well as her central role, when read alongside the stories of matriarchs and patriarchs before her.

In speaking her vow Hannah steps into the role—based on the annunciation precedent—of priest and prophet. As Hannah approaches the temple in distress, the knowledgeable reader

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325. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 85, notes that in the early chapters of 1 Sam, Eli's sons (Hophni and Phinehas) are juxtaposed with Samuel; the latter are portrayed as immoral, but little is said of Samuel's own virtue (or lack thereof). In Chapmans' view, "The implication is that Samuel's success has not been so much earned as granted, that Samuel represents the fruit of Hannah's profound faith, even as Hophni and Phinehas reflect Eli's own cynicism."

326. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 86.

anticipates the arrival of a divine messenger or prophet who will speak an oracle as to the awaited child's future. Indeed, in nearly every other annunciation scene this moment has proved pivotal and defining for the story as a whole. The subtle mention of Eli's whereabouts only heightens this expectation: poised at the entrance to the temple Eli is guaranteed to encounter Hannah on her prayerful vigil. As priest, Eli seems a likely candidate through whom Yhwh will speak to provide the promise of Hannah's longed-for child. Hannah's vow, then, is perhaps the most subversive and informative moment of the story. In place of a divine messenger, Hannah speaks to initiate the birth of her son and to define the role he will play. Juxtaposed with Hannah's foresight, Eli's lack of awareness and prophetic insight is exposed; their brief interaction solidifies Hannah's notability amidst priests and prophets.

The stories of Samson and Samuel as Israelite leaders are brought into conversation with one another through the reuse of the annunciation scene. Indeed, the origin stories of both men bear remarkable similarities: born from barren mothers and less-than-notable fathers, both Samson and Samuel are set apart as Nazarites from the womb. Both men's mothers play definitive roles in their stories, but it is Hannah who volunteers Nazarite distinction not only for her son, but also preemptively and of her own accord takes on the same restrictions prescribed to Samson's mother prior to the judge's birth.[327] Thus Hannah's actions and Samuel's birth are drawn into direct comparison and contrast with the origin story of a judge (and the most renowned judge at that); it is Hannah's discernment and initiative that sets her apart once again and long before Samuel's birth.

Finally, Hannah arises as paragon amongst kings because of her restraint, courage, and faith—all of which are characteristics lauded in her song (1 Sam 2:1-10). Both Hannah's example and the principles set forth in her song serve as a metric by which each of Israel's future kings will be measured and—inevitably—fall short. Thus it is Hannah who emerges first as a leader distinct from all who precede and follow her, an exemplar who demonstrates humility, prophetic insight, and the character sought after in a divinely appointed leader. In contrast to Alter's reading, in which Hannah's bitterness or simplicity set the tone for Samuel's rule, it is Hannah who first and foremost plays a distinct and definitive role as leader in Israel.

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327. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1-12)*, 40.

Conclusion

The use of oaths and vows as a literary convention clearly extends beyond the remit of Anglo-Saxon storytellers such as *Beowulf*'s poet, Shakespeare, and Chaucer. As the case studies considered here have demonstrated, emphatic statements were frequently used by biblical writers to shape plot and characters alike. Indeed, Sternberg's claim that literary conventions are not bound to one particular function is well demonstrated in the use of oaths and vows in Hebrew Bible, which initiate and interrupt narrative progression, contribute to characterisation, express deep emotion, accentuate key themes, and more.[328] Not only does the exploration of these case studies reveal the poetic capacity of emphatic statements, but it illuminates the importance of the technical features of an oath or vow in understanding the full contribution of a given statement to the surrounding context. Details such as subordinate clauses, specific addressees, or structural changes become keys with which to uncover new levels of significance in the story world. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in narratives that revolve around prominent female characters, whose roles have long been the subject of scholarly dispute. In the examples considered here, oaths and vows play an important part in depicting female characters as valorous, wise, and prophetic, but also as victims of a patriarchal worldview. Before turning to implications for future scholarship, it is worth casting a backward glance at the discoveries revealed by each case study in turn.

At the outset of her story, Ruth's oath does a great deal of work towards plot development and characterisation. The account of Elimelech and Naomi's move to Moab in time of famine and the subsequent death of father and sons functions as something of a preamble: it is Ruth's oath that initiates the suspense that drives the rest of this narrative along. The fact that a Moabite widow leaves her people and place and binds herself to her mother-in-law until death (despite the latter's dismal outlook) introduces the compelling question of whether Ruth will fulfil the dramatic terms of her oath. All odds are stacked against her: as a widow she has little to her name, and as a Moabite in Israel she carries the stigma of her nation's history. Nevertheless, Ruth is faithful to her promise; her valour and integrity are unflinching and all the more apparent in contrast to the forebears of Israel and Moab with whom she is juxtaposed. The theme of her comparison to matriarchs and patriarchs is first introduced in the lengthy prologue of her oath and becomes a leitmotif that runs throughout the remainder of Ruth's story, underscoring her virtue at every turn (and particularly in the book's climactic third chapter). Ruth's oath initiates and provides the impetus for this story as a whole, while also bringing to the fore the defining element of her integrity in contrast to biblical progenitors of greater renown.

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328. Sternberg, “Proteus in Quotation-Land,” 148.

While Ruth's oath appears at the beginning of her story, Abigail's is placed at the heart of a three-part pericope. This narrative segment deals particularly with the just employment of power amongst Israel's leadership and in David's career specifically. Sandwiched between two accounts of David's restraint, Abigail's interaction with David prevents him from compromising his status as a just leader by shedding innocent (Israelite) blood. Not only this, but her oath (and the descriptive subordinate clause therein) makes clear that it is Yhwh who has prevented David from jeopardising his role as chosen king thus far. By extension (and in the speech following her oath), Abigail reminds David that Yhwh will continue to fight his battles as long as David does not take matters into his own hands and exert his power against the powerless. Thus Abigail's oath functions as a turning point at a crucial moment in David's career, while also exemplifying her own insight and role as a leader of leaders.

Jephthah's leadership takes a drastic turn when he speaks his own vow. Though the Spirit of Yhwh already rests upon him, the judge finds it necessary to barter with Yhwh for his success in battle. The lengthy apodosis of his vow troubles the notion that Jephthah speaks without thinking: the specifics of his promise include the location (the doors of his house), timing (on his return from battle), and method (by burnt offering) of its fulfilment. Whether or not Jephthah has his daughter in mind when he utters the vow is uncertain (though unlikely, given his outcry at her appearance); either way, his decision to slaughter his own daughter marks a turning point in the book's trajectory. From this point onwards the plot descends at a precipitous rate, each progressive story more bleak than the last. More specifically, the death of Jephthah's daughter exemplifies the increasingly dismal outlook for female characters in the book, a point that is finally driven home at the narrative's conclusion with the rape of the concubine and the capture and forced marriage of hundreds of nameless Israelite women. Jephthah's vow communicates volumes not only about his own fallibility as a character, but also about the progressively immoral and unjust state of the Israelite nation, which is exemplified in part by violence against women.

Hannah's vow has a much more positive effect for her story and the plot of 1 and 2 Samuel as a whole. Spoken at the moment in which an angelic or prophetic oracle is expected (given the precedent set by the annunciation type scene), Hannah's vow epitomises her courage and wisdom. Eli the priest—the anticipated messenger—proves to be entirely unaware; in his stead, Hannah speaks a vow that foreshadows her son's arrival and defines the role that he will play. Hannah's piety is further exemplified by the unique feature of her vow, which includes a direct address to Yhwh. Ultimately, Hannah's vow sheds light on her own character (as well as—by contrast—that of Elkanah, Peninnah, and Eli) while also providing a metric by which every other character in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel might be measured. The combination of Hannah's vow and her song in the introductory chapters of 1

Samuel provide insight into successful leadership in Israel, which is marked by humility and a dependence on Yhwh. This leadership is first demonstrated by Hannah and exemplified in her vow.

The combined work of Ziegler and Cartledge has set the scene for explorations into the literary significance of oaths and vows; this study has further pushed open the door to analyses of emphatic statements as a poetic convention. Still, there is much room left for investigation: Ziegler estimates upwards of seventy oaths in Hebrew Bible and of the five pivotal vows listed by Cartledge there remains much to be uncovered.[329] The literary potency of emphatic statements is at this point fundamentally clear; what remains is a broad horizon for future scholarship on the contributions of oaths and vows as poetic conventions in Hebrew Bible.

329. Ziegler, *Promises to Keep*, 1, fn. 1.

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