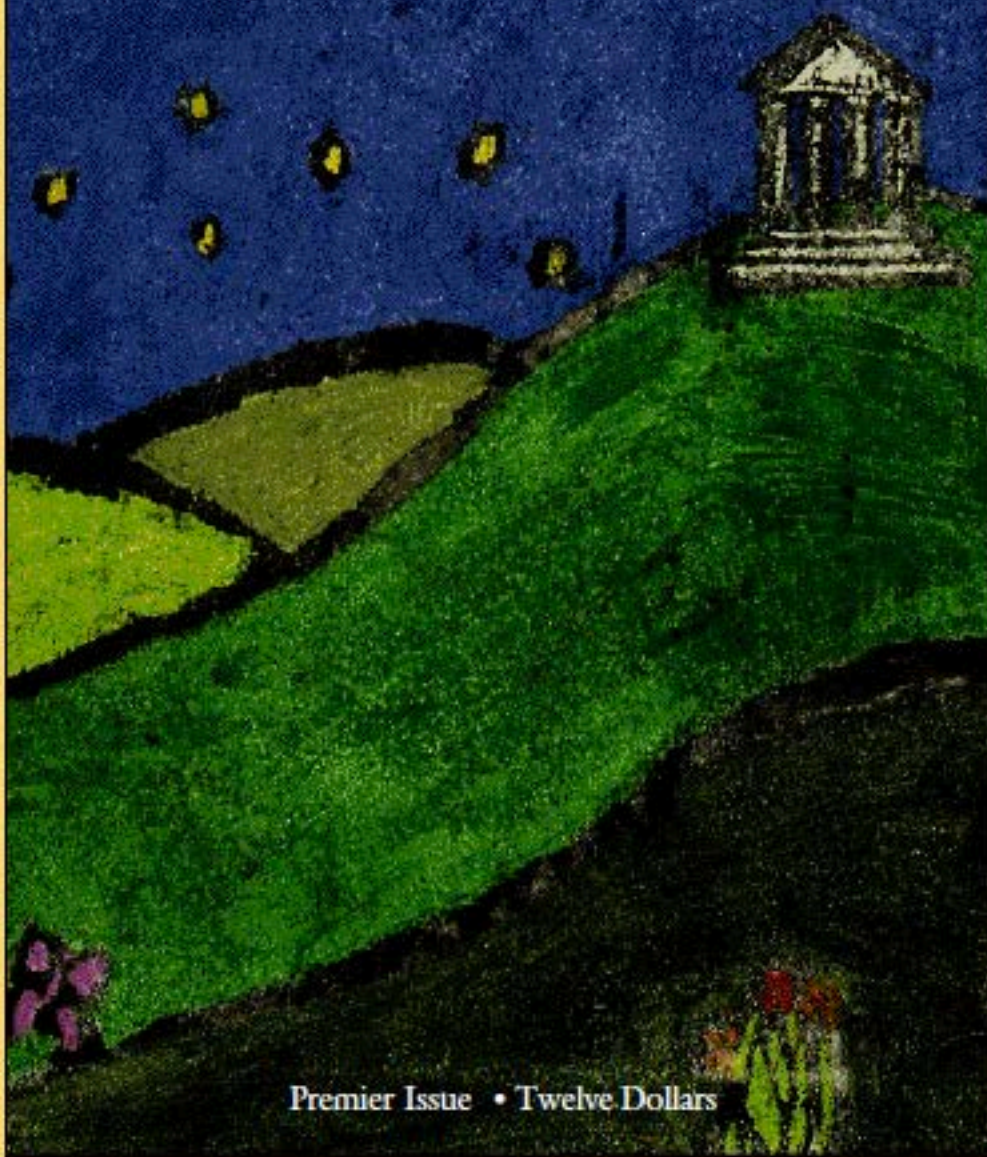


MARS HILL REVIEW

Essays □ Studies □ Reminders of God



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COME, BRING YOUR STORY

By Don Hudson

It is only the story...that saves our progeny from blundering
like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence.
The story is our escort. Without it we are blind.

Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*

I have very few rituals in my chaotic life. One ritual, though, that I hold to religiously is the ritual I practice before going to sleep at night. I crawl in bed at least one hour prior to sleeping armed with an arsenal of books, magazines, and catalogues. First, I read “lighter” material like the latest fly-fishing catalog or *Gun Dog* magazine. Next, I turn my attention to an article or two from a Christian journal or periodical. Then, I will read part of the novel I am currently engrossed in. And finally, I will read the stories of the Old Testament or the Gospels until Suzanne, my wife, threatens to burn all my books in some unholy bonfire if I don’t turn out the light. This is my nightly ritual of inducing sleep and my wife’s ritual of losing sleep.

One night something I read disturbed my sleep. Between dreaming of purchasing a new Orvis PM-10 lightweight rod with the “faster action” and Flannery O’Conner’s novel, *Wise Blood*, I read a seemingly innocuous article in a Christian quarterly. Simply put, the writer of the article presented a pastor struggling to find time for his “daily devotions.” This problem, of course, is a common problem for pastors and parishoners alike. What disturbed me though was the common solution offered for the problem. We have heard this before. First, discipline yourself to sit down and read the Word whether you feel like it or not. Then, develop a system that will help you discipline yourself and keep you consistent. As an aid to the preoccupied pastor, the article displayed a system for consistency that looked like an overworked Day-Timer. According to this author, neglecting the Bible is a problem of discipline.

The more I thought of the article the more angry I became. I could not finish my ritual—I never made it to the Gospel stories that night. Instead, I turned off the light and stewed in a tangle of

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sheets flopping from side to side rehearsing the “honest” conversation I would love to have with my errant brother. Unbeknownst to him, we fenced with one another until the wee hours of the morning and as usual when I have a conversation with myself, I always win.

Now, am I against daily devotions and the godly virtues of discipline, consistency, and systemetization? Of course not. But let me invite you to wrestle with the questions that kept me up that night and were also the final plunges into my opponent’s heart. I would guess that they are also questions you have asked somewhere along your spiritual journey. Why is the Bible so hard to read? Why are there seasons in my life that I would rather do anything but read my Bible? In other words, if the Bible really is the story of God, why must I treat myself like some prisoner in a labor camp who must discipline himself to do the dreaded duty of reading his Bible again? If you were an outsider hearing most Christians talk about *reading* their Bibles, you would think they were speaking of root canals or tax audits.

A NEW THOUGHT ON AN OLD PROBLEM

I went to Bible school with a deep passion in my heart. Since I was eleven years old, I believe that God called me for some type of teaching ministry. Even as a sophomore in high school I would sneak up to a small Bible college in my area and take night classes with college students. This may sound strange to you, but taking first year Greek and a class on the Pauline Epistles was a semester of ecstasy for me. At last I could study the Bible professionally, and this was one of the happiest moments of my teenage years. So when I told you that I felt that I had died and gone to heaven when I entered Bible college it is no exaggeration.

Bible college was everything and more than I expected: Old Testament, New Testament, Theology, Greek Exegesis and Syntax, Church History, History of Doctrine, and Bible Exposition. In all honesty I think I received one of the best educations one could receive in that day. Seminary was a fascinating continuation and deepening of those things I learned in college. I turned my attention to the Old Testament and ancient languages. At the same time, I taught Greek as an assistant professor and ministered in a local church as an assistant pastor. All my dreams were coming true. But there was one trouble. Each passing year of college and seminary brought a gradually decreasing interest in the Bible. The iridescent, passionate flames that I entered college with were cooling to a few glowing embers.

I think though that my interest was waning because as much as I knew, my knowledge never touched me where I lived. I was wrestling with a few significant problems in my life and the Bible was dead. I studied the Bible but it did not speak to me. Secretly, I

turned to Hemingway, Faulkner, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Jung, and Dostoevsky because they spoke to me more powerfully than the Bible did. I studied the Bible but it did not speak to me. A dilemma intruded into my life. My Bible was irrelevant and my world was significant. When I was 28 years old I graduated with a Th. M. in Old Testament. I had received an M. Div., and M. A. in Bible. I had preached for fourteen years and taught as a professor for five years. I had received one of the best Bible educations in the world. And yet, I was in a quandry because I was going out to invite people to read a book that bored me and to listen to a book that did not speak to me. No matter how much I disciplined myself I could not bring myself to enjoy the Bible. I am ashamed to admit that for the first year out of seminary I rarely read the Bible.

My memories haunted me though. Like old friends who would not let me slip away with my despair, they reminded me that things were not always this way. I recalled the consuming desire I had in high school to know the Scriptures, how I had found comfort in the psalms, encouragement in the stories, and rebuke in the epistles. I remembered those impossible days when I held to the smallest thread of truth. The quietest, most insistent whisper though summoned me to remember my boyhood love for the Bible stories. My mother read those stories to me and when I grew old enough to read for myself, I devoured the same stories. This was the memory I could not evade. Memory was my storyteller, and she recalled the story of how I loved the stories.

It was the stories of my boyhood that compelled me to love the Bible. From a world that was terrifying, lonely, and mundane they invited me to a world that was, at times, too unbelievable to bear. They wooed my reluctant heart. Who was this strange God who violently divided the Red Sea, called upon a prostitute to help level the walls of Jericho, whispered to Elijah hiding in a cave, and delivered Daniel from the gaping jaws of ravenous lions? Who were these strange heroes of Judges? Gideon and his fleece. Jephthah and his daughter. Samson and Delilah. Who was this one they called Christ? I thought him to be an odd man. But he healed people. I wanted to be healed. He gave sight to the blind. I wanted to see. He took little children into his arms. Would he take me into his arms? The people he loved the most crucified him. Why didn't he call ten thousand angels, you know, just like the song we sang in church? I wanted to be Zacheus, Peter, Mary, John. I could see myself in the Bible stories. I wanted to be everyone in those stories. After six years of seminary, it was the passionate stories of my boyhood that drew my heart back to the Bible. It dawned on me one day that it was the mystery, passion, and wonder of the story that I had somehow squandered in my youthful idealism. I thought I had outgrown the stories.

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There still remained a flicker in some corner of my darkened heart. Maybe my problem of reading the Bible was more than just a problem of discipline. How quickly do we forget Paul's admonition that the law, discipline that is, is a schoolmaster who leads the student to the truth. God does not view us as machines who need to be programmed but as people who need to be called to something greater.

As I said previously, discipline is important, but making discipline our bottom line in this matter denies the passion and desire inherent to us all. In other words, is there not something undeniable about me that hungers for God? Discipline assumes that something outside of me draws me to the Bible. Story assumes that something inside of me draws me to listen to the Bible. What I find to my comfort and amazement is that a candle of desire is already lit in my heart. Some arsonist lit that candle a long time before I was aware of it. Yes, I am a self-centered, self-obsessed man. There are numerous days that I would like to be left alone to live my life as I choose. However, and I believe I speak for most Christians, there is something deep inside of me that wants to know God. My desire is not always present, but I do enjoy reading my Bible.

So what happened to this desire of mine in seminary? What killed my passion and what kills the passion of so many Christians? This is the major question of the essay. Maybe the way we are taught to read the Bible is wrong. Perhaps the way we read the Bible disciplines our passion rather than liberates our passion. I believe the way I was taught to read the Bible was one of cursing the darkness rather than lighting a candle. Seminary had somehow stripped the wonder and importance of stories from my life. Seminary taught me two things that almost suffocated my reading of the Bible: First, reading the Bible *properly* was comprised of following the right rules, the right method—reading the Bible was a science. If we could get the rules of interpretation right then our reading would be right and good. So I focused on getting all the rules and steps down just as a diesel mechanic would learn the proper way to rebuild an engine.

Second, I was discouraged from bringing my story to the Bible. We must separate ourselves from the Bible so we can understand it. Most pastors are taught that their reading of the Bible should be rational, logical, and objective so they must distance themselves from the text they are reading. To bring their lives to the story is to sully the story. Do you see how important these two points are? Do you see how destructive these points are? We as pastors and laymen are taught to be scientists rather than artists. A scientist stands "over and against" the Bible to understand it. To be a scientist means that I act on the Bible. A scientist sees a problem in reading the Bible and turns to behavior modification much like B. F. Skinner

would. An artist is personally involved and stands *under and within* the Bible to understand it. To be an artist means that the *Bible* acts on me. An artist sees a problem in reading the Bible and turns to the romantic story of God.

Let me introduce you to a different way of reading the Bible. A way of reading that will hopefully draw you back to the passionate story of God. First, I acknowledge that the Bible is a story—not a list of prohibitions, or commandments, or proverbs, or steps—but a story. I do not read the Bible as a story because I happen to enjoy that way of reading. I read the Bible as a story because that's the way the Bible presents itself. God has spoken to us in story and we will do well to listen the way that God has spoken. And, in my opinion, if we read the Bible as anything but story, we are fundamentally unbiblical. It is important to remember that the ten commandments are embedded in the middle of the story of the Pentateuch and not vice versa. The Psalms are a passionate expression of and personal response to God's stories. The Proverbs are stories encapsulated in short, pithy statements. The Prophets are an interpretation, a re-reading of the stories of Israel. In the book of Romans, Paul makes a pointed statement about stories much like Christ and the prophets who preceded him. The church in Rome did not understand the gospel because it did not understand the stories of the Hebrew Bible. To explain salient points of the gospel, Paul returned to the stories of the Bible and reinterpreted them. For example, to elucidate justification by faith he returned to the story of Abraham's justification. To clarify God's strange way of salvation, he re-reads the story of Jacob and Esau. If I understand what Paul is accomplishing in the book of Romans, he is saying to the Romans that they would understand the gospel if they would comprehend the ancient stories of Israel.

What terrifies me about my generation is that we have lost the importance of seeing the Bible as it was written—a story. We have reduced the Bible to a few significant prooftexts, a few commandments, a few steps to secure the good life. We see the Bible just as we see the average self-help book in the bookstore—not a mysterious, intriguing, beguiling story to be caught up in, but a list of principles that will remove the mystery and suffering of our lives.

Second, I read other stories to help me understand the stories of the Bible. If all of us are truly made in the image of God then every story has traces of God in it. I am not suggesting that any story is as authoritative as the Bible stories. But every story has some level of authority because it arises out of the individual and his or her community. The image of God is undeniable and inescapable. And so

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every human reflects the image of God in his or her artistry. The more we read the better readers of the Bible we will be.

This is true for at least two reasons: 1) Every story expands our inner worlds, changes our inner worlds. Repeatedly I have said to my students, "Who you are is how you read." The more you know about life the more you will bring to the stories of God to understand them and apply them. The world is my classroom and humanity is my teacher. 2) Certain stories are very similar to certain stories in the Bible. For example, I am going to ask you to read two stories in the next section of this essay: the fairy tale, *The Handless Maiden*, and then Jephthah's daughter from Judges 11. If you cannot recall Jephthah's daughter it might be wise to read that first and then come back to the fairy tale. As you read *The Handless Maiden* ask yourself these questions. What are the similarities to Jephthah's daughter? I think you will be shocked to see the amazing comparisons. What similar truths are these two stories addressing? Once again the teaching of these stories is very similar. Also, ask yourself if the fairy tale can help you understand the strange story of Jephthah's daughter. What does it mean to read in community? It means to read things that are like us *and* very different than us. One of my mentors, Peter Miscall says "No text is an island." This means that we are all connected intimately to all the stories of the world. Every story we read will aid us in understanding ourselves and our world.

And lastly, I bring my story to the stories of the Bible. The ancient story of Jephthah's daughter has something to say to me today. As I read Jephthah's daughter I see myself and my tendency to sacrifice others out of my own cowardice. I see how easy it is to be oblivious to everyone and everything around me. I see how easy it is to sacrifice relationship in the name of a rash vow. The more I bring my life, the lives of my clients, the lives of my acquaintances to this story, the better I understand it. We are not as different as Jephthah as we want to believe. If I understand Jephthah then maybe I will not destroy others around me like he did. So I read the Bible as a story, I bring other stories to my life, and I bring my life to the stories.

Let's turn now to the exciting stories of *The Handless Maiden* and Jephthah's daughter.

The Handless Maiden

A long, long time ago a miller had fallen upon hard times. All he had left to his name was his mill and a big apple tree behind it. One day he went to the forest to chop wood when an old man approached him. "Why do you exhaust yourself by chopping this wood?" he asked the miller.

"I will make you a very rich man if you give me what is standing behind your mill." The miller thought to himself, "The only thing standing behind my mill is that old apple tree." The miller agreed to the bargain, and the old man promised to return in three years and claim what was his.

The miller returned home and found abundant riches waiting for him. "Where did all this treasure come from?" asked the miller's wife. The miller answered smugly, "I met an old man in the forest and he promised to make me exceedingly rich if I in turn would give him what was standing behind the mill. I can afford to lose the apple tree for all this, don't you think?" "Oh you foolish husband," scolded his wife, "that old man was the devil. Your daughter was standing behind the mill, sweeping the yard."

The miller's daughter was a beautiful and godly woman. After three years, when the devil was to come for her, she bathed herself and drew a circle around herself with chalk. The devil appeared to claim his prize but immediately grew angry because he could not approach her. "Do not let her near water," he commanded the miller. The miller obeyed because he was fearful of the devil. The evil one appeared the next day, but this time she had shed tears on her hands, and so they were clean. The devil was enraged, "Chop her hands off so I can have power over her." The miller was aghast with horror. "I cannot chop off my own daughter's hands," cried the miller. "If you do not do as I command, you will be mine, and I will take you away," sneered the devil. The miller agreed to the devil's demands. He went to his daughter and said, "My daughter, I must chop off your hands because the devil will take me away if I do not. Please help me in my dilemma and forgive me for what I am about to do." "You are my father, do as you wish," replied the daughter. She held out her hands and the miller chopped them off. The devil returned again, but she had wept on the stumps of her arms cleansing them. So the devil gave up and let the daughter go.

Then the miller came to his daughter and said, "Thanks to you we are abundantly rich. I will always care for you." But she replied, "No, I must go away. There will be kindhearted people who will care for me."

The next morning she set out for her journey. She traveled all day until she came to the king's orchard at sunset. She was hungry and wanted some of the fruit but a moat surrounded the orchard. She kneeled and prayed to God. Suddenly an angel appeared and made a place for her to cross. She entered the orchard with the angel and ate from a pear tree. Unbeknownst to her, the gardener was watching but he was afraid to show himself for he feared her to be a spirit. The next morning the king entered the orchard to count his pears. He noticed that one pear was missing and asked the gar-

dener what happened to it. The gardener recounted the whole incident to the king. "I did not question them because I was afraid," explained the gardener. The king said, "If what you say is true, then I will stay and watch tonight."

At dusk the king returned to the orchard with a priest to speak to the spirit. The three men sat down under a tree and waited for the spirit to reappear. Sure enough, the girl stepped out of the thicket and took another pear. The priest approached her and the angel and asked: "Are you from God or from another world?" She replied, "Oh no, I am a girl forsaken by everyone but God." The king said to her, "Though everyone has forsaken you, I will not forsake you." He took her into his royal palace, made silver hands for her, and took her as his wife.

One year later the king went to war. He placed his wife into his mother's care. "If she gives birth, take good care of her, and write me at once," he said to his mother. Soon she gave birth to a fine boy. The king's mother wrote a letter to her son. But the messenger stopped to rest by a brook and fell asleep. Then once again the devil appeared to harm the queen. He changed the letter for another, announcing that the queen had given birth to a changeling. The king was horrified. He wrote back that they should graciously care for the queen until he returns. On his return to the palace, the messenger stopped to rest at the same brook and fell asleep. Again the devil exchanged the letter, commanding that the queen and child be killed. The king's mother could not believe what the king had commanded. She wrote another letter but the answer always came back the same. The last letter explained that they should keep the queen's tongue and eyes as proof of their obedience.

The old mother was horrified. She could not bear to follow the dictates of the king. One night she sent for a doe and cut out its eyes and tongue to keep. Then she demanded that the queen leave with her young son. "I cannot obey my wicked son, but you must leave and never return." The queen and her son left the royal palace and entered the forest. In the forest she fell on her knees and prayed to God. The angel of the Lord appeared to her and took her to a small house. Over the door read this sign, "All are welcome." A snow-white maiden came out of the house and said, "Welcome to my home, Your Majesty." The snow-white maiden explained that she was an angel sent from God to care for the queen and her son. So they lived there for seven years and because God had pity on the queen her hands grew again.

Finally the king returned from his many wars. His greatest wish was to see his wife and young son. His old mother wept bitterly at his sight. "You wicked son," she said. "How could you murder your own wife and son?" She showed him the letters and told him she

had obeyed his commands. At this the king wept uncontrollably. When the old mother saw this she pitied her son and told him the truth. "Do not cry. She is alive. These eyes and tongue are from a doe I secretly killed. I sent her away and told her to never return."

The king vowed to find his wife and son and so wandered for seven years. He did not take anything with him but God took care of him. At last he came to the forest and found the house with the sign, "All are welcome." The snow-white maiden came out and invited him in. "Welcome, your Majesty, please come in." He explained to her that he had spent seven years looking for his wife and child. The maiden offered him food and drink but he refused, asking only to rest for a while. He lay down and covered his face with a handkerchief.

The angel went into another room and got the woman and the young son she now called "Sorrowful." "Bring your child; your husband is here." She took them to the sleeping man and slipped the handkerchief from his face. The king awoke at their words and the queen said to the king, "This is your son Sorrowful." He saw her hands and said, "But my wife had silver hands." She replied that God had restored her hands. The angel went into the bedchamber and brought out the silver hands. Then the king knew for sure that this was his wife and son. He kissed them both and told them how glad he was to find them. They left the forest and returned to the palace where there was great rejoicing and the king and queen lived happily ever after.

AND NOW, *Jephthah's Daughter*

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was the son of a prostitute but he was also a mighty warrior. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife (Jephthah's step-mother) bore him many sons. When his step-brothers grew to be older they cast Jephthah out of the family. They said to him, "You will never inherit anything from our father nor will you be a part of this family because you are the son of a prostitute." At these words Jephthah fled from his family and his land to live in the land of Good. Jephthah the outcast gathered outlaws around him and they went on raiding parties together.

After awhile, the Ammonites warred against the Israelites. When the Ammonites came against Israel, the leaders of Gilead sent for Jephthah in the land of Good. They begged Jephthah to command the battle against the Ammonites. But this made Jephthah curious and so he asked them, "Are you not the very ones who cast me out of my father's house because of my mother? Why are you coming to me now in your moment of trouble?" The elders of Gilead agreed but they pressed Jephthah to be their leader nevertheless. Jephthah spoke to the elders, "If you will allow me to come home to fight, and if the Lord gives me victory, I will be your leader." And the elders

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of Gilead promised Jephthah saying, "The Lord is our witness between us. We will certainly do as you say." Jephthah departed with them and became their leader in battle.

Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites saying, "What do you have against us that you come to fight us?" The king answered, "Because your fathers, on their way from Egypt, took our land from us. Now please return our land in peace and we will not bother you." This time Jephthah sent messengers back to the king telling him that he was surely mistaken. The messengers relayed the entire story of the exodus to the king of the Ammonites. They told him how two other kings acted toward Israel in that day. They finished their message by saying this to the king: "We are not the ones who have sinned against you, but you have wronged us in coming to battle us. The Lord will decide who is right in this matter." But the king of the Ammonites would not listen to the messengers.

After hearing this the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he went out to the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. "If you will give me victory over the Ammonites then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to greet me shall be the Lord's. If I am victorious I will offer that up to the Lord as a holocaust [burnt offering]". So Jephthah went out against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave Jephthah a great victory.

Then Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah. As he approached his house, his only child, his daughter came out of the house to meet him with timbrels and dancing. When he saw his daughter come out of the house he was horrified beyond measure. He tore his clothes and blamed his daughter. "My daughter, you have brought me down. You are the reason for my great trouble today! I have vowed to the Lord and I cannot go back on my vow!" She said to him, "My father, do to me as you wish because you have opened your mouth to the Lord." And she spoke to her father, "Let this thing happen to me. But give me two months to wander in the mountains and grieve my virginity." So she departed with her companions and grieved her virginity in the mountains. When two months were up she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. After this it was customary in Israel that the daughters of Israel would mourn the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite every year for four days.

READING JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

Two stories—one a fairy tale; one a Bible story. Each story tells of a father who sacrifices his daughter. An insecure father who uses his daughter to compensate for his fear and shame. An insecure father who asks his daughter to perform the unique duty

of a father. The miller, in his greed for riches and security, sacrificed his daughter through his oblivion and cowardice. Jephthah, in his fury to remove his shame, sacrificed his daughter through his rashness.

Insecure men are the most dangerous men in the world. The father of the handless maiden was tired of grappling with the frustrations of life, and so he jumped at the first opportunity to get rich quick. There was one problem with his get-rich-quick scheme though—something he failed to see. Like so many men, his vision for riches or just plain comfort (no more exhausting work) blinded him to the obvious wiles of the devil. He was not aware that he was bargaining with the devil. But his wife knew. Strangely, she knew without seeing the devil disguised as the old man or even hearing the conversation. Similar to so many women of the Bible, she saw better than her husband but was helpless to remedy her husband's blindness. Because her husband was foolish to the schemes of the devil she had to suffer the awful consequences. The father could have been suspect of this old stranger so familiar to us all. He could have been suspicious of any bargain that promised to banish the chaos of life and remove the suffering of our existence.

But there is something more tragic than the father's bargain with the devil. The fact that he cooperated with the bargain is mystifying. Remember in the story the daughter wards off the devil first by drawing a circle around herself and then by washing herself. Finally, the devil is rebuffed a third time and chooses to leave the maiden for the time being. Was it not possible for the father to slight the devil also? Or was he afraid of losing his riches? Or was he afraid of what the devil might do to him? When the father drew back from chopping his daughter's hands off the devil threatened him, "If you do not do as I command, you will be mine, and I will take you away." We have already seen that the daughter through her sorrow could renounce the terms of the bargain. Why didn't the father? Maybe he was afraid to do what only a father can do for his children—that is give his life for his daughter.

In this story it is the women who are discerning and nurturing. The maiden discerns that Satan can be thwarted, and foolish bargains are just that—foolish. The mother of the handless maiden discerns the true nature of Satan. Both the mother and daughter see through the illusion of evil. In the end, the miller did not keep his bargain but the devil was left powerless anyway so his power really was illusory. The mother of the king was not a literalist. In other words, she was horrified at the seeming demands of the king so she did not obey him. Satan used cunning to attempt to destroy the maiden and her son. The king's mother used cunning to preserve the life of the maiden and her son. Both angels were messengers of

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God who ministered tenderly to the maiden. For some reason Satan seeks to destroy this beautiful and godly woman. He is obsessed with obliterating the feminine.

In this story, it is the men who are absent. They are greedy, oblivious, fearful, distant, and sleeping. This story answers the question of what happens to a society, a family, a woman when the men disappear, when the masculine abdicates. In the way of the Old Testament, when the men disappear the women are forced to wander as aliens and the children become orphans. The *Handless Maiden* teaches us that the devil does his best work when men are fearful, absent, or asleep. The father harms his daughter through his cowardice; the king harms his wife through his absence; and the messenger harms his queen in his stupor.

The story of Jephthah's daughter is not unlike *The Handless Maiden*. Jephthah was born in shame. His nameless mother was a prostitute. As we begin the story of Jephthah's daughter we find another absent father. Gilead, the father, has relations with a woman outside of marriage. From the point of conception Gilead disinherits his son. Like so many men, Gilead probably thought that his tryst did not matter. He was oblivious to the eternal ramifications of his moment of illicit pleasure. When the legitimate sons of Gilead cast Jephthah out of the family, Gilead was silent. And his silence disinherited his son and like the father in *The Handless Maiden*, caused his child to wander as an outlaw among outlaws. Jephthah's was a double shame—no family, no inheritance. Thus he must have been an empty, insecure man.

Jephthah's story takes a turn for the good though. His brothers seek him to be the mighty warrior for them. Jephthah makes a strange request in return for battling the Ammonites. He doesn't ask for his inheritance—he asks to be their leader. This is significant in the book of Judges because most of the men are reluctant to be leaders (Barak, Samson, Gideon) or they are obsessed with leadership (Jephthah, Abimelech). Just like our present day, the men of Judges do great damage through their silence or violence.

Now, notice what happens before the battle. Jephthah makes his vow after the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. Why did he make this foolish vow after the Spirit visited him? Was he, like Gideon, afraid to battle without manipulating God? Was he, like Barak, afraid to battle unless he invoked the feminine? Or was he, like Manoah, oblivious to the presence of God?

Whatever the reason, Jephthah made a foolish vow. What did he expect to come out of his house? Just like the father of the handless maiden, he made a vow, a bargain without being aware of the consequences. His shame and insecurity led to the death of his daughter.

What is more horrifying though is that he did not put an end to his devilish vow. As with the father of the handless maiden, he assumed the reality of the vow to be more than the reality of relationship. Both fathers disinherited their daughters. Both fathers sacrificed their daughters out of greed and shame. Jephthah perpetuates the cycle of abuse that damaged him.

These two stories teach us one important truth: insecure men are the most dangerous men in the world. And I am one of those men. I can see myself in both stories. I feel insecure, disinherited, and I am already weary from the battle of life. When I act on these feelings I use people, or I neglect my family so that I will be successful, or I ask someone else to be courageous when I am fearful.

Reading *The Handless Maiden* helps us better understand Jephthah's daughter because it gives us categories to think with and look for. It teaches similar truths. Both stories captivate me. I want to know how the story ends, how the conflicts are resolved, so I read on. Both stories expose me. Do I use people to fill my emptiness and remove my fear? Am I sacrificing the ones I love out of my own sense of inadequacy. Both stories encourage me. They give me insight into my own soul and the human condition so that I do not have to perpetuate the sins of the father. I can be different because stories change my life. Story is that eternal moment that reminds me of the past which gives me insight into my present relationships and thus a vision for the future. Maybe these two stories will prevent me from doubting God and thereby prevent me from damaging my children.



Story is about people and God and how people and God come together. The Bible story is a beautiful romance in which God beckons our wayward hearts to join him. It's about being little children, embracing mystery, seeing the unseen, and growing old with delight, not despair. It's about where I came from and who I am and thus who my children and grandchildren will be. And I suppose it's also about faith, hope, and love. Faith that remembers, love that connects, and hope that tells me I'm going to be okay.

We fear and we fret. We build our kingdoms. But story is God's quiet intrusion into our frantic lives; it is the small, still voice that whispers in the caverns of our darkness. God has intruded into my world through story. And so it is the story of God that gives me comfort and brings change to my life.

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When do we, like Jacob, see that our demand to know the name of God is our feeble, but arrogant attempt to master God? When do we walk away from Scripture with a distinctive limp because we came as one person but left as another? It is the mystery of the story of God that draws us in to peak behind the curtain of the tabernacle, but it is also the story of God that breaks us and redeems us into someone we would never be without that story. So come, bring your story to the greatest story ever told. **MHR**