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Why a Cracker? Jephthah's Daughter as the Unleavened Bread of Passover

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Abstract: This article presents a new hypothesis regarding the social and ideological functions of the otherwise unknown festival to commemorate Jephthah's daughter and the meaning of its symbols and occasions. A unique event in the biblical world, this festival is the only time known to us in which Israelite women were expected to appear together in public assembly. Jud 11:39–40 enjoin "the daughters of Israel" to celebrate it annually. The story of Jephthah's daughter, summarized in Jud 11:34–39, evokes and develops many themes that intersect with the depiction of and the prescriptions for observing two well-known festivals that share a season: the holiday of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, Maṣṣot. A synthesis of the correlations among the holidays will suggest that the festival dedicated to honoring Jephthah's daughter was an early, long-lasting folk version of Maṣṣot in which the daughter represented the festival's ritual staple, unleavened bread.

Keywords: Passover; Maṣṣot; matzah; Festival of Unleavened Bread; Jephthah's daughter; child sacrifice; women in ancient Israel

1. Introduction

The story of Jephthah's daughter in Jud 11:34–40 is remarkably enigmatic. It provides a terse etiology for an otherwise unattested holiday in honor of a young woman who died as a votive offering. The event would have been especially significant to the women of Israel, whose annual attendance the story states is expected. This was the only female-specific public event in biblical Israel. Scholars know very little about it.

The purpose of the research described herein was to find out more about the mysterious festival, its social and ideological functions, and the meanings of its symbols.

To start, I used basic literary critical methods, reading the biblical text and examining its language, style, and terms and their usage. A lexical and distributional analysis revealed that several words/phrases stood out as infrequent or otherwise remarkable. This led to the discovery that the story of Jephthah's daughter shares a significant amount of vocabulary and phrasing with, and evokes many of the themes of, stories related to Passover in the book of Exodus.

From this point, I examined the contexts in which the similarities occurred, bearing in mind the Pentateuchal source division theories dominant in mainstream modern scholarly discourse. Closer inspection revealed that the Passover stories sharing language and themes with the story of Jephthah's daughter often referred to Passover as *ḥag hammaṣṣot*, the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The correlations mostly occurred in what Hebrew Bible source critics tend to refer to as the Elohist (E) source.

The realization that many of these connections were found in the E source, which scholars have shown was primarily concerned with places and traditions in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (and potentially with making stories about them compatible in a Judahite context), spawned a new hypothesis. The festival of Jephthah's daughter might align with the aspect of Passover known as *ḥag hammassot*, the holiday par excellence of the Northern Kingdom. The figure of Jephthah's virgin daughter, who became a burnt offering, would symbolize the essential component of Maṣṣot—its unleavened bread.

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Anchored by these observations, this article consists of four sections. In Section 2, I will discuss the terms Passover and Maṣṣot and briefly report scholarly theories on their origins. I will then suggest looking at the holiday of Jephthah's daughter as potentially coordinating with Passover/Maṣṣot and give an overview of the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11. Following this, I will present the connections between the story of Jephthah's daughter and Passover and Maṣṣot. Once these correlations are addressed, I will offer a synthesis of my findings in order to reconstruct folk perspectives, particularly of the Iron I–II. Section 5 will state some potential impacts of this study's findings and their implications for future scholarship.

2. Why a Cracker?

> "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel." (Exod 12:15)

The above passage from Exodus is one of several in the Bible regarding the remarkable practice of abstaining from leavening at Passover. The ancient custom survives in Judaism with the yearly eschewing of risen loaves in preference to the cracker-like bread known as matzah. Christians who partake in Holy Communion recognize this bread as what Jesus gave to his disciples at the Passover meal, the Last Supper (Matt 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:17–23).

These rituals, which have been maintained for millennia, have distinct resonances. In Judaism, the bread serves as a reminder of the Jews' escape from Egypt and the suffering they endured while enslaved there. For Christians, it symbolizes Jesus' body and sacrifice. As different as these meanings are, common roots underlie the rituals. They each derive from the ancient, no longer extant, Festival of Unleavened Bread (*ḥag hammaṣṣot*).

The Bible refers to the Festival of Unleavened Bread many times,[1] but more frequently to Passover,[2] after the caprovine sacrifice that is offered in commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt.[3] The name *ḥag hammaṣṣot* derives from the staple of the diet that is maintained for the holiday's duration.[4] The two names are ostensibly interchangeable in the Torah, both referring to the spring holiday in which a sacrifice from the flock is made and leavening avoided.

Passover, as it is celebrated today, dates back to the Mishnah. Prior to this, its liturgy was not formally set. Celebration would have varied from place to place and time to time based on the particular beliefs and practices among the ancient folk populations of Israel and Judah.

Many have suggested that Passover and Maṣṣot originated independently.[5] Of these suggestions, views are generally that Passover was pastoral, associated with the spring lambing, while Maṣṣot was agrarian and may have been associated with the barley harvest before the wheat crop became dominant (see also Smith 1995 and Pederson 1959). The Passover sacrifice that coincided with the spring lambing was concurrent with both the ripening of the barley and the first appearance of wheat, when new shoots erupt from the ground (Exod 9:32). The wheat harvest, Qaṣir/Shavuot, occurs nearly two months after Passover. The counting of the omer takes place in the interval, tying together these holidays (Lev 23:9–21; Deut 16:9–12).

Maṣṣot and Passover were flattened into the Exodus narrative at an early moment in Israel's history, by the time of the Torah's major sources, between the tenth and fifth centuries according to the Documentary Hypothesis.[6] Goldstein and Cooper have argued convincingly that Maṣṣot was the foundational festival of Northern identity (Goldstein and Cooper 1990, p. 29). In their configuration, RJE combined Maṣṣot with Passover, which was already associated with the Exodus, in order to encourage its celebration in Judah.

While the Torah depicts the most ancient events of the Bible's history, these books are not the Bible's oldest writings. Several sections of the Bible, especially from Judges and Samuel, contain material that predates the corpus of Genesis–Deuteronomy.[7] If there

exists any trace of a separate explanation for Maṣṣot in the Bible, it would be in the Judges–Samuel material.

The present discussion offers a new theory. The account of the festival of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11 was, in fact, an etiology for Maṣṣot. I propose that Judges 11 depicts a Maṣṣot myth as Israelites, especially women, in the Iron I–II would have known it. This suggestion is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind and is the subject of my book currently in progress.

The Festival of Jephthah's Daughter

The story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11 is this: The young woman was the daughter of a wartime hero for whom the war had unique consequences. It was the means by which he would redeem himself before the kin group that had rejected him (Jud 11:1–3); by leading them to victory he would prove his right to rulership (vv. 4–11).

Jephthah led Israel in one of the most pyrrhic victories in ancient literature. Having failed at diplomatic measures to quell conflict—he had dispatched messengers to explain to the Ammonite king how Israel came to be in the land and what route they took out of Egypt to get there (Jud 11:12–28)—Jephthah, in the zeal of battle, vowed to perform a sacrifice to the Israelite god Yahweh in exchange for victory (Jud 11:29–31). Jephthah swore that if he won the battle and arrived home safely, he would offer a sacrifice of whatever came out of his door to meet him when he got back. Jephthah won the battle, but personal tragedy cut short his public triumph. As he arrived home, his daughter, and only child, jubilantly rushed from the house to greet him, bearing timbrels and dancing (v. 34). The act marked Jephthah's daughter for sacrifice.

When Jephthah told his daughter about his vow, she committed herself to upholding it with unwavering responsibility (v. 36). She asked only to have a chance to descend upon the mountains to mourn with her friends over her virginity for two months before offering herself as a sacrifice (v. 37). A dire custom, she mourned the loss of her chance to bear children, descendants who would remember her. The young woman spent the two months with all-female companions, during which time she remained a virgin, never knowing a man (v. 38–39). At the end of this period, she returned to fulfil her duty and was sacrificed (v. 39a). The account spares the audience the gruesome details of her immolation, reporting only that Jephthah "did to her as he vowed." A yearly festival, lasting four days and reminiscent of the journey the daughter made with her cohort, was established in her honor so that Israelite women "would go" (*tēlāknâ*) and "repeat" (*lĕtannôt*) for her (v. 39b-40), that is, tell her story.

Some modern scholars have taken the story of Jephthah's daughter to be from the Hellenistic era (see, for example, Spronk 2019). The primary argument for this late dating arises from comparison to Euripides' tale, Iphigenia in Aulis. But the book of Judges houses some of the Bible's earliest compositions, and these antedate Euripides by six hundred years! Core elements of the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11 resonate with the narrative of Saul's 11th century reign. Both men prove their right to rule by defending Gilead against Ammon (1 Samuel 11, Judges 11). And, each in battle unwittingly makes an oath that endangers the life of his firstborn child (1 Sam 14:24–44, Jud 11:29–31).

Many have attempted to explain the story of Jephthah's daughter and the festival for the women of Israel (*bĕnôt yiśrā'ēl*) that it depicts. Some have suggested that the festival was a rite of passage for women as they entered adulthood.[8] Others view it as purely a literary invention (Boling 1974). A few rabbinic exegetes argued that the daughter's sacrifice was to live out her natural life as a virgin, cloistered, and that the festival was an annual visit to her.[9]

There is no actual description of the festival in the Bible to go on. Details about the festival—including where the women went and what they did—are a mystery. There is no indication of what the holiday was called or when it took place. Even the name of its honoree is unknown. She is only referred to as Jephthah's daughter.

Although the festival of Jephthah's daughter is depicted as having public relevance, it was essentially a secret event. Still, there is much to learn about the festival from what the Bible does provide. Once the story's details are considered carefully, it will become clear that the festival of Jephthah's daughter fits well as an etiology for Maṣṣot, one in which Jephthah's daughter was the holiday's central figure.

3. Correlating the Festival of Jephthah's Daughter with Passover and Maṣṣot

Evidence supporting the identification of the festival of Jephthah's daughter with Maṣṣot includes the following: the two months between Jephthah's vow and its fulfillment; the phrase with which the festival's occurrence is articulated, "from year to year" (*miyyāmîm yĕmîmāh)*; the festival's designation as an "ordinance" (*ḥōq*); the phrase denoting the daughter's appearance "with timbrels and in dance" (*bĕtuppîm ûbimĕḥōlôt*); the four days every year that the Israelite women attended the festival; and, the daughter's status as Jephthah's firstborn. Analysis of these points will uncover the relationship between the festival of Jephthah's daughter and Maṣṣot.

3.1. Šĕnayîm Ḥŏdāšîm—Two Months

How Jephthah's daughter spent her days with her cohort during the period leading up to her sacrifice is unknown. The Bible states only that she went up to the mountains to "bewail her virginity" for two months with a group comprising exclusively female companions (v. 38–39). Why the period of time was two months has baffled scholars.[10] Traditional exegetes have tended to follow Pseudo-Philo's interpretation that the daughter sought counsel from community elders about the vow's legitimacy.[11] However, there is no evidence to support this view. I suggest a different approach; the daughter's departure and return corresponded with a known period. Only two significant events fall within a two-month timeframe in biblical literature: Passover/Maṣṣot and Shavuot.

Passover/Maṣṣot marks the appearance of the first fruits of spring, the birth of the flocks and the emergence of the grain. Tied to this is the wheat harvest, Shavuot (Exod 34:22; Deut 16:10), also known as *qāṣîr* (Exod 23:16) or "first-fruits" (Num 28:26). According to sources from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, the span of time between the two occasions is seven weeks or forty-nine days (Lev 23:16, P and Deut 16:9, D).

Yet, earlier Pentateuchal material indicates that the period between Passover/Maṣṣot and Shavuot was not fixed. Instead, the harvest festival would have occurred whenever the crop was ready, approximately two lunar cycles from the emergence of the first sprouts.[12] The period between the appearance of grain and its maturation may fluctuate slightly from year to year depending upon environmental factors such as temperature and rainfall. This period could be accurately represented as "two months/new moons", *šĕnayîm ḥōdašîm,* the same period indicated for the journey Jephthah's daughter made before she returned for her sacrifice (Jud 11:37–39).

The name of the festival, Shavuot, is traditionally understood in light of the realization of its root *šb′* as "week" (*šabua′*) or more loosely as "seven" (*šeba′*) But, the plurals of these words are formed with the masculine suffix *-îm*, "weeks" (*šabū′îm*), "sevens"/"seventy" (*šib′îm*). However, when the root is realized as a feminine (*šābū′â*) it means "oath." And, the feminine plural of this pattern, "oaths" (*šābū′ôt*), is exactly the name of the festival, Shavuot, which evokes the vow made at Passover/Maṣṣot to offer the first fruits (Exod 23:19 and 34:26).

Jephthah also made oaths. One he made the people of Gilead swear; that he would rule over them if he prevailed in battle (Jud 11:9–11). The other was to Yahweh that he would offer a burnt sacrifice (*′ôlâ*) in exchange for victory, which, unbeknownst to him at the time he made it, would cost him his only child (Jud 11:31). Warring was an especially vernal activity in ancient times. Jephthah's battle and his vow more than likely occurred in the spring. If this was around the time of Passover/Maṣṣot, he would have fulfilled his oath to sacrifice his daughter around the time of Shavuot. The two months between her father's vow and her sacrifice would correspond to the interval in which wheat appears and thrives in abandon until its harvest.

3.2. Miyyāmîm Yĕmîmāh—From Year to Year

Another link between the festival of Jephthah's daughter and Passover/Maṣṣot is the peculiar phrase that refers to both events' annual occurrences, *miyyāmîm yĕmîmāh*. In addition to the festival of Jephthah's daughter there are only five occurrences of the phrase *miyyāmim yāmîmāh* in the Bible.[13]

Miyyāmim yāmîmāh refers to the commemoration of the Exodus at the spring equinox (Exod 13:10) and appears in the stories of the abduction of women making pilgrimage in the hills of Shiloh (Jud 21:19) and Hannah's conception of her firstborn, Samuel (1 Sam 1:3; 2:19). From the standpoint that the stories in Samuel and Judges focus on female characters, contain themes evocative of the story in Judges 11, and are part of a continuous cohesive narrative,[14] I suggest they be regarded as referring to the holiday that originated with Jephthah's daughter.

The semantic range of the phrase *miyyāmîm yĕmîmāh* is narrow. It is typically translated to mean annually, appearing in the KJV and JPS as "yearly" or "from year to year". Repetition of the root *ywm* with modifying elements is the basis of the phrase. *Yôm* commonly means "day". However, as *yāmîm*, it also means "year".[15] Affixed to the base *yôm* is the preposition *min*, followed by morphological doubling and the directive suffix *-āh*; hence, "from year to year".

Analysis shows that *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh*'s literal meaning, "from days to days" or "from year to year", indicates its association with the period of New Year's. The Bible suffers no shortage of terms for annual occurrences. The expressions "yearly" or "per year", *layyāmîm*, (Jud 17:10); "at the end of every year", *miqqeṣ yāmîm layyāmîm*, (2 Sam 14:26); "year by year", *šānâ bĕšānâ*, (1 Sam 1:7); "yearly", *šānâ šānâ*, (Deut 14:22); and "year after year", *šānâ ʾaḥărê šānâ*, (2 Sam 21:1) all occur in biblical Hebrew. *Miyyāmîm yāmîmāh* is the only one of these phrases consistently used in a festival context. Exod 13:10 contains E's prescription for commemorating Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh and the execution of the Egyptian firstborn: "you shall keep this ordinance (*ḥuqqâ*) according to its season annually (*miyyāmîm yāmîmāh*)." The ordinance is to be observed during the month of Aviv (Exod 13:4). In this context, made explicit in Exod 12: 2, "This month shall be for you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year for you", the phrase *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh* indicates the time one year is ending and the next is beginning, "from year to year"—New Year's.[16]

The phrase *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh* appears in the context of a *zebaḥ hayyāmîm* "sacrifice of the year", thus increasing the likelihood of it having a specialized semantic range (1 Sam 1:3, c.f. 21). The *zebaḥ hayyāmîm* may in fact have been the original referent of the phrase *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh*. A ninth century BCE Aramaic inscription from Zincrili (modern-day Turkey, ancient Sam'al), the stele of Kuttamuwa, uses a similar phrase "year to year" (*ymn lymn*) to stipulate the frequency of sacrifice to an individual requesting offerings made to his spirit (Pardee 2009; Sanders 2013). The inscription claims that the stele holds the spirit (*nbš*) of Kuttamuwa, who commissioned it, and enjoins anyone in possession of Kuttamuwa's land to make an offering to him from its yield for generations to come. Kuttamuwa's stele demands an offering be made to him "every year" (*ymn lymn*).

The stele from Zincirli also stipulates the offerings to be made yearly. The inscription demands the offering of produce from the vineyard and from flocks. It describes a similar kind of sacrifice as the *zebaḥ hayyāmîm* of the Bible, the major difference being that Kuttamuwa's inscription demands that his descendants, or whoever else may own his property, must make offerings to him. The yearly ritual may shed light on the phrase *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh* and its relationship to the *zebaḥ hayyāmîm*.[17]

The biblical authors may have chosen *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh* for the annual observance in which one offers the sacrifice, the *zebaḥ hayyāmîm* (1 Sam 1:3, c.f. 21). *Zebaḥ* appears in connection to *pesaḥ* in several instances: *zebaḥ ḥag happesaḥ* (Exod 34:25); *zebaḥ pesaḥ* (Exod 12:27); *zibḥî* (Exod 23:18). Passover/Maṣṣot is the only identifiable festival to which the term *zebaḥ* is applied.

Of the three major festivals represented in the calendars of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 16), the Exodus Covenant Code (Exod 23:13–17) and the Decalogue (Exodus 34), the only one that requires a meat offering (*zebaḥ)* is Passover/Maṣṣot.[18] The contexts in which *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh* and *zebaḥ hayyāmîm* appear imply that sacrifice is made to Yahweh. Ancestral veneration practices were widespread among the Israelite folk population (Deut 18:9–13, 26:14), and the festival for Jephthah's daughter was this type of veneration practice.

3.3. Ḥōq—Set in Stone

The holiday's institution is a significant occurrence in biblical narrative. That the Bible endowed the festival of Jephthah's daughter with the prestige of origins, an etiology describing when, where, how, and why a public ordinance for all the women of Israel to attend the festival came to be, should not be taken lightly. And neither should the fact that the festival of Jephthah's daughter is designated as a *ḥōq* (Jud 11:39).

Meaning "ordinance" or "prescription", *ḥōq* is related to the roots *ḥqh* "cut in" or "carve" and *ḥqq* "cut in", "inscribe", or "decree"; it derives from the notion of a command that is set in stone. Its usual translation, "custom" (as in KJV and JPS), hardly demonstrates the gravity of its application.

The word suggests permanence. The festival was meant to last for generations. And, the *ḥōq* applies to all the women of Israel, not just those of Gilead. This is the only festival attested in ancient Israel when women all over Israel left their homes to gather in public assembly. Contrast that to men, who were expected to assemble for public rituals several times a year.[19] For women, the festival for Jephthah's daughter was a unique convocation. Besides its appearance in the story of Jephthah's daughter, *ḥōq* is used in a festival context only in relation to the foot festivals: Passover/Maṣṣot, Shavuot, and Sukkot.[20]

3.4. Bětuppîm Ûbimĕḥōlôt—With Timbrels and in Dances

Jephthah's daughter makes her first appearance when she comes out to greet her father "with timbrels and in dances", *bětuppîm ûbimĕḥōlôt* (Jud 11:34). The remarkable act presents yet another correlation to the Bible's account of Passover/Maṣṣot. The phrase *bětuppîm ûbimĕḥōlôt* occurs in Exod 15:20 at the crossing of the Red Sea, where Miriam, identified as a prophet and sister of Aaron, led the Israelite women in dance during Passover/Maṣṣot. The expression *bětuppîm ûbimĕḥōlôt* appears only when Miriam leads the women in a victory song after the Egyptian defeat at the Red Sea (Exod 15:20) and when Jephthah's daughter welcomes her triumphant father home from war (Jud 11:34).[21]

On the first day of the first Passover/Maṣṣot, all the women of Israel were moved to follow Miriam in extolling Yahweh for his defeat of Egypt. Exod 15:20 explains, "Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron, took timbrel in hand. All the women went out after her in timbrels and in dance (*bětuppîm ûbimĕḥōlōt*). Miriam answered them, 'Sing to Yahweh for he has surely triumphed. Horse and rider he has cast into the sea'".

Similarly, Jephthah's daughter performed a victory dance for her warrior father's triumphant return. All the women of Israel would then follow. Joyful dancing appears many times in biblical literature.[22] But that the phrasing is identical and is embedded in etiologies about holidays in which individual women lead all-female cohorts makes a strong connection.

3.5. Four Days

For four days every year, the Israelite women were to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah. "It became a law in Israel that the daughters of Israel went yearly (*miyyāmîm yĕmîmāh*) to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year" (Jud 11:39–40). The length of four days is unusual. Once again, Passover/Maṣṣot offers a correlation. Exod 12:3–6 directs each family to select the paschal lamb for sacrifice on the tenth of the month and keep it for four days, slaughtering it on the fourteenth. "On the tenth of this month each of you will take a lamb for the house of your fathers, a lamb per house" (v. 3). "And you will keep it until the fourteenth day of this month and the whole

assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it between the two evenings" (v. 6). This would correspond to the transition in the phase of the moon from waxing gibbous (half and increasing) to full. The festival of Jephthah's daughter and Passover/Maṣṣot occasion the only references to the routine observance of a special four-day period in the Bible.

If the women's festival does indeed connect to Passover/Maṣṣot, the ritual of selecting the sacrificial lamb four days prior to its slaughter could have coincided with the women's departure and their return. In this scenario, slaughtering the lamb would signify redemption for the women taking part in the festival for Jephthah's daughter. Jephthah's daughter had been the sacrifice that redeemed the Gileadites from their foreign oppressors, parallel to the slaughter of the paschal lamb as redeeming the Israelites in Egypt.

3.6. Death of the Firstborn

The final piece of evidence connecting the festival of Jephthah's daughter and Passover/Maṣṣot is the theme of the death of the firstborn child. Jephthah's daughter was his only offspring (Jud 11:34) and, therefore, his firstborn. Her sacrifice evokes a central motif in the Bible's Passover/Maṣṣot drama: the deadly plague against the firstborn when the Israelites were in Egypt.

The death of the firstborn is integral to Passover/Maṣṣot and prominent in its commemorating ritual.[23] A series of miraculous exploits against Egypt occasions Israel's escape and sets the stage for entry into the land of Canaan. The plagues against Israel's Egyptian oppressors culminated in the death of the Egyptian firstborn, allowing the Israelites to flee (Exod 11:5, 12:12, 29–32). This was Yahweh's execution of judgment on the gods of Egypt.[24] Each Israelite household sacrificed a lamb and smeared its blood upon their doorposts to protect them from the plague in Egypt (Exod 12:7, 13, 22). Because the Israelites had stained the doorposts of their houses with lamb's blood, differentiating themselves from the Egyptians, all the Israelite firstborn children survived while calamity ensued among the Egyptians: "When Yahweh sees the blood, he will skip the entrance of the house, and Yahweh will not let the plague strike your houses" (Exod 12:22–23, 26).

The Maṣṣot regulation in Exodus 13 begins with Yahweh's demand to "consecrate to me every firstborn; whatever escapes any womb of the children of Israel, of man or animal—it is mine [Yahweh's]."[25] Moses instructs Israel to recall the death of the Egyptian firstborn by offering its own firstborn kin and flock:[26] "When your son asks you later 'what is this?' you shall say to him 'with a strong hand Yahweh brought us out from Egypt, from a house of bondage. And when Pharaoh hardened to let us go, Yahweh killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the first of human and the first of animal. Because of this, I am sacrificing to Yahweh every male that escapes the womb. All of the firstborn of my children I shall redeem'".[27]

Each of the Torah's sources proclaims the Exodus moment as the origin of the Passover ritual.[28] The holiday is said to reenact Israel's deliverance from Egypt, memorializing Yahweh's stunning defeat of the gods of Egypt and his redemption of Israel from enslavement (Exod 12:12, P, 18:8–11, E). A paschal lamb was to be sacrificed to commemorate the means by which Israel averted the deadly plague against the firstborn of Egypt (Exod 13:15). The Passover/Maṣṣot presentation entails the elements of consecration of the Israelite firstborn, a sacrificial lamb, belief in the apotropaic power of its blood, and a symbolic ritual meal in which the celebrants consume unleavened bread and lamb.[29]

The Torah explains the ritual of consuming matzah as abstaining from leavening. The avoidance of leavening is due to the urgency of Israel's escape from Egypt (Exod 12:34, 39). In the Passover story, matzah symbolizes the flight from oppression. In the rush to escape, the Israelites take the dough they had begun preparing, packing up and leaving before they could add leavening to it.[30] "They baked the dough, which they brought from Egypt, cakes of matzah because it had not yet been leavened; for they were thrust out of Egypt and could not delay, nor had they made for themselves any provision" (Exod 12:39).

Matzah was made of flour from the previous harvest, not the new ripe or immature grain (Josh 5:11). According to the Exodus account, the hailstorm of the seventh plague

destroyed Egypt's harvestable grains (Exodus 9). The barley was ripe, and the flax was past ripe, in calyx or corolla, when the hail storm battered the Egyptian landscape (v. 31). Wheat and rye were not harmed because they were just beginning to break ground (v. 32). Most likely, the heads of the emergent grain were regarded as unfit for human consumption. Rather, the new grain was probably "the first of the first fruits" dedicated to the deity.[31]

The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter was also dedicated to Yahweh, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand then whatever comes forth from the doors of my house to greet me upon my safe return from the Ammonites will be Yahweh's and I will offer it as a burnt offering"(Jud 11:31). Jephthah gave his firstborn to Yahweh in exchange for victory over the Israelites' foreign oppressors. In this way, the holidays of Passover, Maṣṣot, and Jephthah's daughter share a mythological framework in which the firstling offering for Yahweh was central to Israel's rescue from its enemies. Recounting the Exodus story would seem to have had a place in each of the holidays; the declaration of Israel's journey out of Egypt was central in the border dispute between Jephthah and the king of Ammon (Jud 11:12–17).

4. Synthesis

The evidence above exhibits an overall harmony. The various elements work together to illuminate the connections between the festival of Jephthah's daughter and Passover and Maṣṣot. From these complementary details, it becomes possible to envision a much more vibrant context for the daughter's festival, as well as for Passover and Maṣṣot.

The festival of Jephthah's daughter was likely a version of Maṣṣot consisting of a compulsory four-day yearly women's ritual venerating the young virgin who willingly sacrificed herself, and who was also likely to have been viewed in folk tradition as an avatar of the wheat goddess.[32] The story of Jephthah's daughter would then reflect the life cycle of harvested wheat, and the phenomenon of wheat's natural appearance would align with the women's journey. The duration of the daughter's time with her companions—two months—correlates with the growth cycle of wheat, which appears at Passover and is harvested at Shavuot (the story could just as well fit the barley harvest).

The daughter and her companions would have set out on their journey when the first shoots of wheat broke ground. They would have returned at the time of the harvest, when the wheat was full but had not yet gone to seed. The daughter was sacrificed, and her companions lived. She represented the wheat cut down before it bore its seed, which became the ritual matzah. An apt metaphor for the transformation of grain to unrisen bread, the nameless virgin who was sacrificed symbolized the festival's central meal.

Eating unleavened bread during such a pilgrimage festival would have been quite practical. Made only of wheat and water, simplicity is its appeal. Matzah is a quickly prepared food made from two basically non-perishable, readily procurable, easily portable items, making it ideal for travel. In fact, the Bible explains that the bread was consumed during Passover for precisely this reason (Exod 12:34, 39). The Israelites escaping Egypt could not delay. They did not have time to wait for their bread to rise. The women on the four-day pilgrimage for Jephthah's daughter would have known the same haste.

For reasons of sympathetic magic, Passover/Maṣṣot would be an auspicious time to remember Jephthah's daughter. In the ancient Near East, there was a pervasive folk belief that the natural world comprised sentient and sometimes compassionate entities (Lebedev 2022). The women's ritual mourning might be thought of as able to stir the heavens to rain on the crop emerging from the ground. A good soaking at the time of Maṣṣot would be a boon. Rain at Shavuot, on the other hand, could devastate a crop.

At Passover/Maṣṣot, a portion of the emergent grain is set aside as an offering of first fruits to Yahweh.[33] The rest matures until the harvest (Shavuot). Some of the grain is used for replanting, while the remainder provides food until the next crop is ready. The saga of generations plays out in the yearly rhythm of the old grain's depletion and the new crop's emergence.

The recipe for matzah, unleavened flour mixed with water and baked, was transformed into the daughter's narrative: the virgin daughter, her tears of mourning, and the burning of her body. One may intuit why the Bible did not reveal Jephthah's daughter's name. The daughter represents the cultivation of spring wheat, which dramatically bursts onto the landscape and dances untended in fields before its harvest.

5. Conclusions

The reconstruction proposed above departs from previous perspectives in (1) identifying the festival of Jephthah's daughter with Maṣṣot, (2) locating the original relationship of Passover and Maṣṣot rituals in a social matrix, (3) implicating state regulation in the revised mythology of folk practice and its eventual transformation, and (4) proposing a cross-cultural gendered ritual background for the original practice.

The festival of Jephthah's daughter is significant for understanding how women's cultic traditions were coordinated on a public level, particularly from the eleventh to eighth centuries in ancient Israel. The festival would have been an important aspect of social networking of women from different kinship groups among folk populations. The festival's history is a case study in how the state incorporates, transforms, and regulates important aspects of folk religion.

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Notes

1 Exod 12:17, 23:15, 34:18; Lev 23:6; Deut 16:16; Ezra 6:22, 2 Chron 8:13, 30:13, 21, 35:17.

2 Exod 12:43, 48, 34:25; Lev 23:5; Num 9:2, 4–5, 10, 12–14, 28:16, 33:3; Deut 16:1; Jos 5:10–11; 2 Kgs 23: 21–23; 2 Chron 30 1–2, 5, 15, 18.

3 Exod 12:21, 27; Deut 16:2, 5–6.

4 Exod 12:15,18, 20, 13: 6,7, 23: 15, 34:18, Lev 23:6, Num 28:17; Deut 16:3,8, Jos 5:11, Ez 45:22 2 Kgs 23:9.

5 For a comprehensive bibliography and summary of these arguments see (Segal 1963).

6 There are many theories of the Torah's composition. My own viewpoint falls within what many refer to as the Documentary Hypothesis. I accept major aspects of Richard Elliott Friedman's analyses on the Documentary Hypothesis. For representative materials of Friedman's see (Friedman 1987, 2003). My disagreements with Friedman's analysis are minor, limited to individual instances of source division. That is to say that I, like Friedman, hold that there are J, E, P and D sources and that they are all pre-Exilic with the exception of D, which has pre and post-Exilic elements.

7 See (Halpern 2001), especially pp. 57–72, for discussion of dates for Judges and Samuel material.

8 On the story symbolizing passage into womanhood, see (Day 1989).

9 This interpretation has survived in several modern Jewish movements. Medieval commentator David Kimḥi explained that the phrase with which the Bible states that Jephthah "did to her as he vowed" mean that Jephthah let her live but that she remained a virgin and was secluded until her death, presumably from natural causes. See Kimḥi on Jud 11:39. Ibn Ezra also purportedly interprets the verse this way, as is noted in Nachmanides commentary of Lev 27:9, wherein he refutes the claim. Ibn Ezra's comment is no longer extant.

10 Modern commentaries offer little explanation. Spronk has no answer, see (Spronk 2019). Sasson calls the interval a "riddle" and notes that the "interval does not seem especially meaningful." (Sasson 2014).

11 Pseudo-Philo *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum.* Some anachronistically say it was the Sanhedrin she consulted.

12 Unlike P and D's seven weeks, in J and E no designation of time appears. In fact, E refers to the holiday with distinct nomenclature, calling it simply "harvest" (*qāṣîr*), a word without temporal implication (Exod 23:16).

13 Exod 13:10, Judg 21:19, 1 Sam 1:3, 2:19; Judg 11:39b–40

14 In the Hebrew Bible the arrangement of books places the books of Samuel after the book of Judges. This differs from Protestant and Catholic Old Testament arrangements, in which Ruth follows Judges.

15 Lev 25:29; Jud 17:10; 1 Sam 27:7; 2 Sam 14:26; 1 Chron 21:19.

16 The later autumnal New Year of Judaism, Rosh Hashanah, is not named in the Bible; it began in post-biblical, rabbinic times.

17 In his commentary on the Stele, Pardee enlists help for translating the phrase *ymn lymn* from the 1 Sam 1:3 occurrences of *miyyāmîm yāmîmāh* (Pardee 2009, p. 58).

18 P is the exception. Lev 23:19 demands a *zebaḥ šĕlāmîm* with Shavuot in addition to Passover.

19 Males (*zĕkarîm*) are to appear in public three times Ex 23:17; 34:20, 23; Deut 16:16

20 Deut 16:12. The related term *ḥuqqâ* applies to other significant holidays. Exod 12:14, 17, 43; 13:10 (*pesaḥ*); Lev 16: 29, 34 (*kippūrîm*), 31 (*šabbat*); Lev 23:14 (*pesaḥ*), 31 (*šābû'ôt*); Num 9:3, 12, 14 (*pesaḥ*).

21 In my aforementioned book that is now in progress, I will elaborate on the parallel between the women who follow Miriam and the women who go up to the hills of Shiloh in Jud 21:21. A review of figurines bearing these motifs from the heartland of the festival for Jephthah's daughter in the tenth to eighth centuries BCE, particularly at Tel en-Naṣbeh and Tel Reḥov, shows how common this imagery was in domestic contexts and how important the motifs must have been.

22 2 Sam 6:21–22, Ps 30:11–12, 149:3–4, 150: 1–6, Jer 31:12–13, Lam 5:15.

23 Death of the firstborn is in the E and P narratives, E in Exod 4:22–23; 12:29–33; 13:1 and P in Exod 12:12–13, as well as and the holiday represented in Jud 11:34–40. It bears mentioning that while I identify Exod 13:1 as E many have reckoned Exod 13:1–16 as a Deuteronomistic insertion. See Friedman's discussion and denial of this attribution in (Friedman 2003, p. 139). The question of authorship of this single instance is immaterial to the present discussion. It would simply mean that the trope exists in Dtr material in addition to E and P.

24 P, Exod 12:12, Yahweh kills the gods of Egypt. See (Friedman 2017, p. 182).

25 Exod 13:2, E source. The P source has another prescription in Ex 12: 1–13. J in Exod 12: 21–27, repeated in Exod 22:29 without the redemption clause that follows in Exod 13:13, E.

26 Exod 13:14–15, E. Yahweh's firstborn is Israel in E (Exod 4:22). In P, the Levites (Num 3:12) are the replacement for Israel as Yahweh's firstborn.

27 The theme of the firstborn is present only in the P and E sources (Exod 12:12–13 P, 26–27 E; Exod 13:12, 14–15, E). The concept is notably absent from J and D. These sources tie Passover/Maṣṣot to the Exodus commemoration but without mention of Egyptian firstborn (J, Exod 34:18–19; D, Deut 16:1–8).

28 Exod 12:1–13 (P), 21–27 (J); Exodus 13 (E); Deut 16:1 (D).

29 The Bible reflects what was at the time already an antique, customary meal of the lambing season that consisted of unleavened bread (matzah) and a kid (*śeh*) from each family's flock (mainly sheep or goat), one kid per family (*bayit*). E, J, and D sources (respectively, Exod 13:12; 34:29; Deut 15:19–20) require an offering of a first born from the familial flock. Uniquely, P does not require the paschal lamb to be the first born of its flock but rather prescribes the kid to be a year old from a familial flock of sheep or goat.

30 *ṭerem yeḥmaṣ.*

31 Exod 23:19, E and 34:26, J. This interpretation is analogically based on the notion that the Israelites are supposed to have dedicated the firstborn of their flocks in remembrance of the smiting of the firstborn during the tenth plague (Exod 13:2), and the fact that green wheat matzah would be acrid and unappetizing.

32 Compare to Ezekiel's accusation of women weeping for Tammuz, the wheat deity (Ez 8:14). A. Jeremias connects the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter with the Tammuz-Ištar cult (Jeremias and Johns 1911). Burney says the festival portion of the story was based on myth and not history. He points to Epiphaneus' description of the related ceremonial for Kore in Syria as identified with Jephthah's daughter (Burney 1918).

33 Exod 23:16,19, 34:22,26; Lev 2:12, 14, 23:10,17,20; Num 18:12, 28:26; Deut 18:4.

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