

## linguistic similarities between the narratives about the daughters of the Biblical Jephthah and of the mythological Agamemnon

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**George Frideric Handel**

In 1752 in Covent Garden, Handel conducted his last oratorio: “Jephtha” written to the libretto of Thomas Morell which was based on the story of Jephthah in the Book of Judges, and on George Buchanan’s drama: *Jephthas sive votum* - “Jephthah or the vow.” As in Buchanan’s play, the name of Jephthah’s daughter in the oratorio is Iphis.



**George Buchanan by A Bronckorst, 1581 (National Gallery of Scotland).**

Buchanan was a Scottish scholar and dramatist. Most scholars believe that the name Iphis alludes to the Greek mythological figure: **Ἰφιγένεια** (Iphigenia), the daughter of Agamemnon whom he sacrificed to plead with the gods to generate winds that would enable him to sail to Troy.

As Buchanan was exceptionally proficient in Latin, and had translated to that language various Greek plays and the Book of Psalms, it is not surprising that he noticed the similarity between this mythological tale and the narrative about Jephthah's daughter of the Book of Judges. In particular, The resemblance of Agamemnon's contract with the gods to:

**וידר יפתח נדר ליהוה, ויאמר: אם-נתון תתן את-בני עמון בידי. והיה היוצא אשר יצא מדלתי ביתי לקראתי בשובי בשלום מבני עמון-והיה ליהוה, והעליתיהו עלה.**

**“And Jephthah vowed a vow to *YHWH*, and said: If You will indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand;**

**Then it shall be, that whatsoever comes forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be *YHWH*'s, and I will offer it up for a burnt-offering” (Jud 11:30-31).**



**"Jephthah's Rash Vow" (1807), by James Gundee & M. Jones, London.**

Soon after the return of the victorious Agamemnon from Troy, he was murdered by Clytemnestra - the mother of the late Iphigenia. In contrast to most other Judges, the Book of Judges is mute in regard to what happened to the victorious Jephthah after he fulfilled his vow.

In the Book of Judges we also read:

ותלד אשת-גלעד לו בנים; ויגדלו בני-האשה ויגרשו את-יפתח, ויאמרו לו לא-תנחל בבית-  
אבינו-כי בן-אשה אחרת אתה.

ויברח יפתח מפני אחיו, וישב בארץ טוב; ויתלקטו אל-יפתח אנשים ריקים ויצאו עמו.

“And Gilead's wife bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove out Jephthah, and said to him: You shall not inherit in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman.

And Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob; and there were gathered vain fellows to Jephthah, and they went out with him” (Jud 11:2-3).

According to the Greek mythology, Ἀγαμέμνων (Agamemnon) was the son of King Atreus and Queen Aerope of Mycenae. After the murder of Atreus by Agamemnon's half-brother - Aegisthus, Agamemnon fled to Sparta.

The Psalmist wrote: אף-נחלת שפרה עלי - “I have a goodly heritage” (Ps 16:6; see also: Gen 49:21).

The word: שפרה (*shaphrah*) sounds similar to Sparta, and as the meaning of this word is: “good”, it would not be surprising if it was assumed that the name of the land of Sparta means in Hebrew: ארץ טוב - “Land of Tob” or a “good land.”

Agamemnon's daughter name: Ἰφιγένεια (Iphigenia), means” “born to strength” which could be translated to Hebrew as בת יבטה (*bath ivtakh*) - “daughter of confidence” (e.g. 2 Ki 18:19; Is 36:4). We should notice that בת יבטה (*bath ivtakh*) could be viewed as a bilabial and dental exchanges variant of בת יפתח (*bath iphthakh*) - “the daughter of Jephthah.”