

Bidding with our daughters: Re-reading Judges 11 through the lens of childism

**Author:**Zukile Ngqeza¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Bibliological Perspectives, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Mafikeng, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Zukile Ngqeza,
zukile.ngqeza@nwu.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 14 Nov. 2024

Accepted: 24 Mar. 2025

Published: 30 Apr. 2025

How to cite this article:

Ngqeza, Z., 2025, 'Bidding with our daughters: Re-reading Judges 11 through the lens of childism', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46(1), a3383. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i1.3383>

Copyright:

© 2025. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This study read Judges 11 through the lens of childism. Childism is a hermeneutical approach that challenges the way children are marginalised in (biblical) literature and society. Just like methodological and theoretical 'isms' such as feminism, womanism, postcolonialism, and decolonialism are used as theoretical lenses for critical inquiry, research, and activism, childism provides a hermeneutical lens for deconstructing adult-centredness in the academy and society. Thus, when employed in biblical studies, childism critically and methodologically challenges 'adultism, developmentalism, and ageism' in biblical texts and contemporary society. In this article, I will utilise childism as a lens to re-read Judges 11 because Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in order to fulfil his vow to YHWH. The child-adult relationship (with its power dynamics) between Jephthah and his daughter will be read critically. Because childism is a theoretical lens that emerged from an interdisciplinary field of childhood studies, I will draw from scholars of childhood studies and childism to read and interpret an Old Testament narrative (Jdg 11). Ultimately, this study will offer an 'age-inclusive imagination' for the academic study of the Old Testament and contemporary society.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study demonstrates intersections between childhood studies, childism, and biblical studies. Based on childism as a hermeneutical lens, this study challenges the power asymmetry between Jephthah and his daughter. This study is interdisciplinary because I utilise childism scholars to read an Old Testament narrative.

Keywords: childism; childhood studies; childhood adultism; age-inclusive; Jephthah; daughter; autonomy; self-determination; Judges 11.

Introduction

Because the Christian Bible is not immune to adultism and ageism, it is necessary to read them in ways that redeem and re-centre the lives of children. Thus, the relationship between the Old Testament and childism is important to pursue. Childism as a 'new lens or prism' will be utilised to assist in 'deconstructing ingrained historical adultism' committed by the narrator and commentators of Judges 11 (Biswas et al. 2023:1; Wall 2022:257). Often biblical narrators and commentators are adults who present children in ways that compromise their (children's) agency, voice, autonomy, and self-determination. There is a need to give special attention to children and childhood in the Christian Bible. Faulkner and Zolkos (2015:ix) have been concerned about the relegating of 'the child' in the pursuit of (biblical) scholarship. This often leads to having children as the add-ons and backgrounds with muted voices, agency, and autonomy, while adults are presented as main characters in biblical literature (cf. Hens-Piazza 2003:121). Thus, a 'pro-child' reading of biblical narratives such as Judges 11 is needed. Therefore, this study will use childism to deconstruct the 'power asymmetry' between Jephthah and his daughter.

Childism as a lens within the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies

It is important to provide a brief background of childism as not just a scholarly contribution that deals with children as objects of study but as a hermeneutical lens that uses children as their 'own critical lens or frame of subjectivity' (Wall 2022:257). Just like 'isms' such as feminism, womanism, postcolonialism, and decolonialism provide scholars and activists with language and tools of theoretical analysis for scholarship and activism, childism grants scholars a language to uncover and describe the unequal power relations between children and adults in literature and society (Wall 2022:257). For instance, in describing patriarchy from a childist perspective, the rule of the 'pater' as a male and also as an adult will be problematised.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Thus, childism provides the 'needed critical lens for deconstructing adultism across research and societies and constructing a more age-inclusive scholarly and social imagination' (Wall 2022:257). Feminism exists to strive for gender equality, while childism seeks to achieve an age-inclusive imagination both in the Bible and contemporary society.

Childism is not a new separate methodology but a theoretical lens within childhood studies. In the same way, feminism came out of women's studies, childism came out of the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies as part of a quest to enhance this new field of study¹ (Wall 2022:258). Thus, childism is not intended to replace childhood studies; instead, it is fundamentally based on it. Consequently, Wall (2022:258) argues that scholars who do not use childism yet whose research interests are on children must acknowledge that they are missing an important critical lens (Wall 2022:258). It is equally important to acknowledge that although childism is not limited to specific academic disciplines, few scholars make use of it. Biswas et al. admit that childism as a theoretical framework, unlike other concepts such as 'feminism, anti-racism, and posthumanism', has not yet largely entered the grammar and the lexicon of philosophy (Biswas et al. 2023:2). Even biblical scholars who write on the experiences of children in the Bible do not necessarily use childism as their theoretical lens.

Childism enables the humanities and social sciences to think differently about children and childhood in that it positions the voices and experiences of children at the centre of scholarly analysis and also disturbs and destabilises the long-held assumptions which ignored children in literature and society (Biswas et al. 2023). Biswas et al. (2023:2) consider childism as a 'pro-child concept' which is different from the 'anti-child use of the term outside childhood studies to prejudice against children'. Many times children's rights movements and activists propel the anti-child posture by only speaking of 'rights' without seeking to disturb and destabilise the historical philosophical underpinnings that ontologically sabotage children. Thus, childism deals more with children's indicative (who children are) nature rather than the imperative (what they do and what is done to them in terms of rights) nature of children.

Childism is a quest to go beyond the developmental approaches to children and young people and study children 'not as social becomings but as social beings' (Wall 2022:258). Children are not 'humans to be', but they are already human. Thus, children should no longer be seen as 'passive recipients of adult socialization but as active and diverse social participants in their own right' (Wall 2022:258). Muhlbacher and Sutterluty (2019:258) also argue against the idea of developmental childhood, which views childhood as a stage of life that is a mere way to adulthood and consequently reduces children into inactive objects in need of socialisation programmes. Children can be social agents for their lives and those of adults.

1. For an in-depth study on childhood studies, Ngqeza (2024a) explains that 'Childhood Studies is not a discipline but an interdisciplinary field, it brings together scholars and activists from different disciplines' of humanities and social sciences. The scholars from these various disciplines 'draw insights and perspectives from each other to respond to the complexities of the child' (Ngqeza 2024a:2).

Even though childhood studies have done well in advocating for children to be understood as research participants rather than as research objects and that they must use their voice and agency to form and influence policy direction in socio political platforms, childism as a theoretical lens challenges the 'adultization of public space and the intersectional power dynamics' (Wall 2022:259). The fact that it is mainly adults who tell the stories of children in biblical narratives and that it is also adults who write bible commentaries confirms how the 'space' has been adult-dominated in ways that deny children their voice, agency, autonomy, and self-determination. It is in the interests of childism to demonstrate that children have the potential to be the creators of their worlds and that they can take part in age-inclusive social imagination (Muhlbacher & Sutterluty 2019:249). Thus, childhood studies stand against any effort to demote children into inactive beings that require formation into (hu)manhood.

Warming (2023:6) locates childism as 'a critical stand toward adultism, developmentalism, and ageism in society and academia'. Thus, childism is based on acknowledging and challenging generational and age-constructed classifications that often lead to oppressive power relations between children and adults as well as other marginalised groups (Warming 2023:6). Thus, for Warming (2023:6), childism is against all forms of discrimination and marginalisation and not only about children. Its critical stance against adultism, developmentalism, and ageism can contribute to the broader struggle for social justice for all (Warming 2023:6). However, the uniqueness of childism when compared with other liberational frameworks is that childism calls for children and childhood to be seen and understood in a 'non-adultist and non-developmental manner' (Warming 2023:7). In other words, children should be seen as human 'beings' and not human 'becomings' (in that 1 day they will become adults, which equals full humanity, voice, agency, representation, etc.).

Furthermore, the shifting of childhood studies towards the lens of childism is a quest by the scholarly society to explore how children's experiences can be understood when child-adult asymmetry is taken seriously (Wall 2022:259). Childism, when applied in biblical studies, helps scholars to interrogate and deconstruct the the child-adult relations in biblical texts (Biswas et al. 2023:6). Thus, childism offers a 'generation perspective' (as a lens of biblical sociology) in a similar manner as the lens of gender is used in academia and society. Childism, as a generational perspective, enables biblical scholars to look critically and also deconstruct the unequal child-adult power relations in the Bible and society.

The implications of childism for a biblical scholar

Childism has implications for a biblical scholar when it is used as a lens to read biblical texts. Childism as a lens can assist biblical scholars in redeeming the agency, visibility, autonomy, and self-determination of children in biblical narratives. As a philosopher, Wall (2023:3) argues that

childism tasks scholars of philosophy to think differently in a similar way to feminism, critical race theory, trauma theory, and other theoretical lenses that challenge philosophy as a discipline. I also argue that childism challenges biblical scholars to think differently and contributes to how we read and interpret Old Testament narratives. As a theoretical lens, childism has the potential to disturb and destabilise adultism and age-based oppressive categories in biblical texts. The contribution of childism is not only to identify and mourn the hidden voices, agency, and representation of children in biblical narratives but also to demonstrate the ways in which 'agency and voice themselves, as well as social norms in general, are defined in adultist or patriarchal ways that implicitly or overtly prioritize adults over child objectivities' (Wall 2023:3). Dube (2010:371) has called for the deconstruction of Euro-Americanism in the academic study of the Bible because for many years its interpreters were male and western-dominated. It is time for biblical scholars to acknowledge not only the history of 'sexism, classism, racism, and colonialism' but also the 'history of adultism' held by biblical narrators and biblical commentators (Dube 2010:371; also cf. Wall 2023:3).

Therefore, biblical scholars owe it to themselves and society to deal with adultism in the academic study of the Bible in a similar way feminist biblical scholars like Dube (2010:371) have done in as far as the role of patriarchy and androcentrism in biblical scholarship.

Borrowing from Wall's (2023:3) understanding of how childist hermeneutics assists in restructuring philosophy as a discipline, I argue that a similar situation happens to theological and biblical studies. Childism re-organises the academic study of the Old Testament 'ontologically, hermeneutically and ethically' (Wall 2023:3). Ontologically refers to 'being' rather than the 'doing'. It is understanding children in the Bible as those who are already fully human in terms of 'interdependence' with other beings such as adults. This refers to the systems of interdependence between children and adults (horizontally and vertically) (Wall 2023:3). Hermeneutically, childism assists biblical scholars to re-imagine the process of interpretation 'as an act of reconstruction' (Wall 2023:3). This is understanding the process of interpretation as re-constructing the patriarchal and the adult-centred ways of reading and interpreting biblical narratives. An emphasis is given to children's hidden lives, bodies, voices, agency, autonomy, and self-determination. Furthermore, childism as a hermeneutical lens enables a way to respond to the oppressive and unequal power relations that exist in the Bible and contemporary society and a call to move away from politics of difference to inclusion. Ethically refers to the profound interdependence between children and adults; childism helps in re-structuring the reading of biblical narratives and society towards age-inclusive empowerment (Wall 2023:3).

Childism further empowers biblical scholars in using the experiences of the children to crucially engage the androcentric and adult-centric perspectives of biblical

narrators and commentators (Wall 2022:260). More than just understanding the child-adult power relations, childism also enables biblical scholars to recognise and deconstruct the socio-political underpinnings upon which children and childhood are defined and constructed in the Bible and contemporary society (Wall 2022:260). Thus, childism helps biblical scholars to understand that society and scholarship are set on the foundation of systematic adultism to which childism responds (Wall 2022:260). Childism empowers us to investigate the ways in which being an adult is regarded as a norm while childhood is abnormalised as well as how in biblical texts the roles of children have been unheeded and muted (Wall 2022:261). However, childism is a new theoretical lens to read the Bible. Many biblical scholars have not used it to read biblical narratives such as Judges 11. This study is a demonstration of how adultism can be challenged and what a pro-child biblical interpretation looks like when childism has been utilised to re-read and interpret a biblical narrative.

Applying childism to re-read and interpret Judges 11

I will begin by demonstrating how Bible commentators have read and interpreted Judges 11 before I apply childism to re-read and interpret the narrative (Jdg 11). Interestingly, Wong (2012:29) does not connect Jephthah's vow to sacrifice his daughter with how women and children were treated in ancient Israel. Instead, Wong (2012:29) argues that the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter meant that Jephthah was influenced by 'pagan religious practices' rather than God's instruction in the Torah (Dt 12:31 and 18:10) and that he did not have faith in Yahweh even though God's spirit came upon him (Jdg 11:29). Wong (2012:30) further sees the daughter's response as proof of her 'greater awareness of the demands of the law than her father', hence she tells him to fulfil his vow to Yahweh. Wong (2012:30) does not see the daughter's request (in Jdg 11:36–37) as a claim for her agency, autonomy, and self-determination.

In Judges 11:4–11, Jephthah is offered a leadership position as a reward if he agrees to lead the Israelites in the war against the Ammonites. There was a negotiation between Jephthah and the elders of Israel. The negotiation was about what Jephthah would get in return for leading Israelites in a war against the Ammonites. This is a war that would later claim the life of Jephthah's daughter. Webb (2012:303) calls this negotiation 'bargaining'. Spronk (2019:333) argues that Judges 11:4–5 and 11 'is a story of bargaining as a web of perspectives and competing interests, offers and counter-offers in the world of give and take'. The conversation between Jephthah and the elders was about 'who would get what'. Initially, Jephthah was offered the position of the 'chief' [לִקְצֵן] (Jdg 11:6) if he agreed to lead Israel's army against the Ammonites, but after he was reluctant, the offer was upgraded to the position of the 'head' [לְרִאשׁ] (Jdg 11:8) (Spronk 2019:333). The result of the negotiations was that Jephthah scooped the position of head and chief (Spronk 2019). Notwithstanding that Webb (2012:303) and Spronk (2019:333) do not problematise how Jephthah and the elders of Israel bargain for positions in

order to embark on a war that would later take the life of the child, Jephthah's daughter. Instead, Spronk (2019:333) sees the negotiation between Jephthah and the elders as 'diplomacy'.

Regarding Jephthah's vow, Spronk (2019:341) argues that verses 30–31 and verses 34–40 may be a later addition. Even if these verses were a later addition, their inclusion brings many questions regarding how children were valued in ancient Israel. It is dumbfounding that Spronk (2019:341) celebrates Jephthah's vow as his effort to solve his problems by negotiating as he did with the elders in verse 9. It should be noted that Yahweh does not respond to Jephthah's vow, and therefore it (Jephthah's vow) cannot be understood as negotiation and bargaining similar to negotiations in verses 4–11.

Spronk (2019:342) does consider the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter from the gender perspective but not necessarily from the childist perspective. He connects the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter to the value of women in ancient Israel. However, he does not consider the value of children in ancient Israel. Spronk argues that Jephthah's decision to sacrifice his daughter forms part of the Old Testament narratives that demonstrate the ways in which women were equated to household animals and pets. Thus, the difference between women and animals was blurry (Spronk 2019:342). It is my view that while it is important to consider the association of Jephthah's daughter with how women were treated in ancient Israel, it is equally important to read Judges 11 in connection with how children were treated in the Old Testament world. For instance, Ngqeza (2024b:30) observes that although children were considered gifts of God in ancient Israel society, the daughters were not regarded with the highest degree of importance (cf. Gn 19:1–8, Jdg 19:16–28). To the extent that the family visitor was regarded as more significant than the girl-child (Ngqeza 2024b:30). Thus, reading and understanding Jephthah's daughter as a child is also important. She was not only a daughter but was also the only child. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter cannot be seen outside the 'biblical system of household, domestication, difference, and sacrifice, and the complex meaning associated with it' (Spronk 2019:343). For instance, Bae (2023:10) argues that human sacrifice as a practice was not uncommon in the social life of ancient Israel. The legal texts of the Old Testament have references to human sacrifice (e.g., Ex 13:12–15 and 34:19). Bae (2023:10) continues to argue that a father could sacrifice his child and animals because both of them are under his authority. Just like how Spronk (2019:342) argued that in ancient Israel, the difference between women and animals was blurry, it was also the case with children. Thus, from a childish perspective, Jephthah's daughter joins a list of children in the Old Testament who were sacrificed or killed by adults against their will (e.g., Isaac in Gn 22, the child of the prostitute in 1 Ki 3:16–28).

Webb (2012:322) argues that Jephthah's vow to Yahweh was a bribe in a similar way to how the elders of Israel bribed him with the position of chief and leader. Webb (2012:323) does

not question and query that Jephthah uses a human being and a child as a bribe for Yahweh to help him win a war. Webb (2012:323) continues to argue that although there is no clarity in the text as to whether the victim of sacrifice will be a human being or an animal, the phrase 'to meet me' in verse 31 suggests that Jephthah's victim would be a human being rather than an animal. But Webb (2012:323) does not discuss how dehumanising and denial of agency and autonomy it is to bid by another human being and a child's life.

Webb (2012:329) does justice demonstrating that Jephthah's vow was unnecessary because Yahweh would grant him victory. The spirit of Yahweh was already upon him (Jdg 11:30). Thus, Jephthah's vow was simply a bribe. However, vows in the Old Testament were taken seriously to the extent that if a person made a vow to do something evil, they had to confess their sin, bring an animal, and the priest would sacrifice it on their behalf. Therefore, according to Webb (2012:329), Jephthah could withdraw his vow when he saw his daughter coming out of his house to welcome him. But what is lacking from Webb (2012:329) is a critical challenge of how adults like Jephthah viewed women and children in the Old Testament. The asymmetrical power relations between Jephthah and the daughter are what are lacking in Bible commentators such as Webb (2012:329).

Smit (2018:158) also argues that the horrendous vow by Jephthah to Yahweh is a later addition because Judges 11:29 ends with his leading his army to war against the Ammonites, and in 11:32, Yahweh grants him victory. Smit (2018:158) is of the view that the reason the editor added Jephthah's vow in verse 31 is that he or she wanted to 'avoid the suggestion that the Spirit inspired the oath'. Yahweh would not empower (by his spirit) Jephthah to kill his child but would surely inspire him to attack the Ammonites. It is dumbfounding to me that Smit (2018:158) is more concerned with defending the 'Spirit of the Lord' rather than Jephthah's daughter. Like Webb (2012:329), he does not challenge Jephthah's views (and of adults in the Old Testament) about women and children. It seems that for Smit (2018:158), as long as the spirit of the Lord is not perceived to have caused Jephthah to kill his daughter, all is well. But the victim in the narrative is the daughter who got sacrificed on the belief that her father made a 'vow' to the Lord. How women and children were treated in the Old Testament should be viewed critically, especially the unequal power relations between adults and children.

Although the book of Judges is considered as part of Deuteronomistic History's Narrative (DtrH) and that human sacrifice was generally rejected, scholars such as Bae (2023:13) and Tatlock (2020:302) argue that not all forms of human sacrifice were disapproved in the DtrH. For instance, sacrificing those who commit adultery and break the covenant was a reality (cf. 2 Ki 23:20 & Dt 13). This shows that Jephthah did not have to sacrifice his daughter because she did not commit or break the covenant. From the childist perspective, this further confirms how the lives of women and children are easily disposable in the face of patriarchy and adult-centrism in biblical narratives and contemporary society.

In the following sections, I will use childism to re-read and interpret Judges 11. Because childism as a hermeneutical approach draws from scholars of human and social sciences to re-read biblical texts, I will also draw concepts from scholars such as Muhlbacher and Sutterluty (2019), Sutterluty and Tisdall (2019), and Butler (1993) to deconstruct adult-centred interpretations of this narrative. These concepts are power asymmetry, socialisation and devaluing of children's bodies, autonomy, and self-determination. I will utilise these concepts to bring about a pro-child reading of Judges 11. Furthermore, these concepts will assist in centring an 'age-inclusive' Old Testament scholarship and social imagination.

Power asymmetry

The power asymmetry between children and adults is embedded in socialisation processes premised in households and society (Muhlbacher & Sutterluty 2019:253). Thus, the asymmetrical relationship between children and adults positions children as the 'other' and makes them subordinates of adults. This is because the unevenness of this relationship is hierarchical and places adults as more valuable than children. Hence, children are often excluded from participating in public life. Muhlbacher and Sutterluty (2019:253) call for a new social arrangement beyond the 'asymmetric generational order' such that children are seen as equal participants with adults in the social imagination.

Judges 11 is not immune from the power asymmetry between adults and children. Thus, it is necessary to socially locate Jephthah, the elders of Israel, and the Ammonite king as both males and adults while also reading the unnamed daughter of Jephthah as a female and a child. In Judges 11:4 and 8, Jephthah is offered a position of commander and ruler of the people of Gilead. In these texts, we see the first bargaining for positions in return for pursuing a war that would cost the life of a girl child. This is similar to our contemporary context where adults initiate wars that would destroy the lives of women and children. For instance, Turk (2024)² announced that almost 70% of murders in Palestine are those of women and children.

In Judges 11, adults are deciding on the future of the nations (Israelites and Ammonites) while women and children remain nameless and bound to domestic confines. In Judges 11:4–11 and 12–28, adults such as Jephthah, the elders, the messengers, and the king of Ammonites are, therefore, introduced as those who possess and also bargain societal power, while Jephthah's daughter is introduced in the household context. In Judges 11:34, the daughter comes out of those to meet her father, who comes from the echelons of power bargaining. There is no mention of Jephthah's wife, and their daughter's name is not given. It appears that the daughter and possibly her mother were at home while Jephthah and the elders of Israel were bargaining for positions. In verses 30–31, Jephthah vows to sacrifice 'whatever' comes out to meet him, even if it is against their

²Volker Turk is the United Nations Human Rights Chief. He was interviewed in November 2024 by *Al Jazeera*.

will. This shows how adult-centrism and androcentrism undermine the voice, agency, and lives of children.

Socialisation and devaluing of the children's bodies

The decision to sacrifice children in the Old Testament has implications on how the bodies of children are valued or devalued. The body and socialisation of children are problematised in childhood studies. Just like Judith Butler (1993) in 'Bodies that Matter' taught us that bodies 'indicate world beyond themselves' and that the body comes 'in genders', I argue that we must not miss that first and foremost the body comes 'in age'. As Butler (1993:ix) advocated and lived for 'bringing the feminine body into writing', it is more than necessary to bring the child's body into writing. Many times children's humanity is doubted and/or denaturalised because of their little bodies. Thus, failure to recognise the materiality and intrinsic value of children's bodies has often led to disembodiment and dismembering of children. For instance, in South Africa, despite many children who have died because of the poisonous food products sold by street vendors and tuck shops, parents still give their children money to buy snacks from these shops.

Dangerous chemicals have been found in the bodies of children who died after eating snacks from a local tuckshop (Mutsila 2024). This speaks to how children's bodies are not adequately valued in South African households and communities. Thus, children's bodies 'never exist outside the meaning that is attributed to childhood' (Muhlbacher & Sutterluty 2019:257). How the bodies of children are interpreted and understood affects the way children are socialised and treated. The biologisation of children as a category that determines the value of children is challenged in childism. Thus, seeing children as incomplete bodies or beings who need to grow into adulthood to participate in society is problematised in childism (Muhlbacher & Sutterluty 2019:253).

Jephthah's vow to sacrifice 'whatever' came out of his house even though he saw that it was his daughter, confirms how the bodies of children were not regarded as 'fully human' in ancient Israel (cf. Spronk 2019:342). However, her resistance to being sacrificed immediately and, instead, asking for 2 months more is not only self-determinacy but could also be seen as a way of affirming ownership of her own body. She demands the right to mourn the loss of her body, sexuality, and fertility (since she will die a virgin). It seems clear that what she mourns the most is that 'she will not have children' (Jdg 11:38 [NTL]). She recognised how the adult-centric decisions of Jephthah have ruined her body (not only her life) and fertility. Both in the Bible and contemporary society, adults often make decisions that would lead to the destructive and toxic biologisation of children. In South Africa, there are many situations where parents poison and kill their own children. For instance, in the Limpopo province of South Africa, a father killed his 2-year-old child by cutting his body

into pieces (Maromo 2024). The sacrifice of Jephthah's body and the stories of parents killing their children in South Africa confirm the adult-centred socialisation and devaluing of children's bodies in biblical and contemporary societies.

Autonomy and self-determination of children

In this part of the article, I briefly explain and use child autonomy and self-determination as aspects of childism to read Judges 11. Using childism to read Judges 11 implies a need to go beyond issues of agency and voice (as important as they are) into appreciating the hierarchisation of difference between Jephthah as an adult and her daughter as a child. From the perspective of childism, it is insufficient to limit a pro-child reading of Judges 11 only to exhibit the voice and agency of Jephthah's daughter. There is a need to consider the power asymmetry between Jephthah and his daughter, the socialisation of children's bodies in the Old Testament world, as well as the need to consider autonomy and self-determination for children.

Muhlbacher and Sutterluty (2019:254) argue that, like adults, children possess an internal value of 'child-sensitive autonomy'. Thus, there is a need to understand the concept of child-sensitive autonomy. This is the autonomy of children 'as children' in that children have the potential to be builders of their lives and those of adults. The concept of autonomy is located in independent individuals, including children. Independence does not mean that children do not need adults, but it refers to children's ability to decide on the fate of their lives and bodies.

It is also important to note that the autonomy of children as 'self-rule' does not mean that children become adults, but it implies that children have some form of autonomy embedded in their beings. For instance, children have the capacity to make rational decisions, and they can also identify certain ideals and commit to those ideals. Furthermore, children can make judgements informed by certain standards and ideals (Muhlbacher & Sutterluty 2019:254–255).

There is a relationship between autonomy and self-determination. Self-determination signifies 'an independent, informed formation of opinion about important aspects of one's life'; on the other hand, autonomy denotes 'a kind of self-rule in which orientation-providing norms must additionally come with a justification of their validity' (Sutterluty & Tisdall 2019:184).

Ultimately, self-determination and autonomy are anchored in the concept of individual self-rule and self-understanding (Sutterluty & Tisdall 2019:184). Applying ideas of self-determination and autonomy in the academic study of children and childhood has the potential to assist in combating adult-centred attitudes that regard children as internally 'immature, dependent, and powerless' (Sutterluty & Tisdall 2019:184). The argument for autonomy is about children themselves being allowed to determine their own

future. Over and above that, the main agenda of childhood studies is to demonstrate the ways in which children should be acknowledged as shapers of their own lives and those of adults. Child-centred autonomy does not suggest that children should be individualistic, in that they do not need the assistance of adults. Child-centred autonomy does not call for independence but rather the interdependence of children and adults. Furthermore, child-centred autonomy is a non-hierarchical relationship between children and adults (Muhlbacher & Sutterluty 2019:258). In the end, child autonomy strives for equal partnership while appreciating the differences between adults and children.

Jephthah's daughter's request for two months in Judges 11:37 can be seen as a claim for autonomy and self-determination. Although Jephthah's vow to Yahweh leads to her death, she decides on the time of her death and/or sacrifice. As a matter of self-rule, she resists being sacrificed/killed immediately but asks for 2 more months. Even though she cannot change the fact that her father will sacrifice her, she still claims her right to self-determination. She also affirmed her right to mourn her loss of fertility. Jephthah's daughter does not allow her father to have a monopoly on the interpretation of his vow to Yahweh. She offers her interpretation in Judges 11:36 (NLT), 'Father, if you have made a vow, you must do to me what you have vowed, for the Lord has given you victory over your enemies, the Ammonites'. She also adds her voice and negotiation in Judges 11:37 (NLT), 'But first let me do one thing: Let me go up and roam in the hills and weep with my friends for two months, because I will die a virgin'.

Furthermore, Jephthah's daughter's request to weep with her friends (fellow children) in verse 37 can be understood as a claim to autonomy as self-understanding and shared agency. It is with her friends that she shares childhood but also a denial of agency, voice, autonomy, and self-determination. She demands communion (weeping together) with fellow children as well as mourning over the fact that she will die a virgin. Although she will end up dying, she will die resisting and negotiating, as she does in verses 36 and 37. Thus she dies in her time (2 months later), having mourned her loss to produce. Furthermore, the fact that she demanded time to mourn with her friends can be understood as a demand for children's agency. That children will weep with their friends can be understood as children refusing to 'play tambourine and dance with joy' (as in verse 34) when their friends will die as a result of an adult-initiated war. The unified weeping of children is a recognition of adults' decisions that not only take the lives of children but also their right to agency, autonomy, and self-determination. In fine, through the request to 'roam the hills and weep' with her friends in Judges 11:37, Jephthah's daughter is resisting the 'adultization of space' by creating with her friends an alternative space for children and childhood. This is a space against toxic adultism and a quest for childrenisation of biblical and contemporary society. It is where children would 'roam the hills and weep' together as they live out their autonomy

and self-determination as children. In Judges 11:39, Jephthah returns to her father, and he sacrifices her according to the vow he made. From the perspective of childism, Jephthah's daughter's return to her father to be sacrificed does not mean she gave in to adultism but rather demonstrates that her story ends with cooperation between Jephthah and herself. Childism does not call for the extinction of adults but rather for equal partnership between adults and children.

Conclusions

Using childism to re-read and interpret Judges 11 contributes to a more pro-child biblical scholarship. Furthermore, because the Bible is not immune to adultism, developmentalism, and ageism, this article demonstrates the ways in which childism assists in constructing an age-inclusive social imagination in the Bible and contemporary society. The unequal power relations between adults and children in Judges 11 (in terms of Jephthah and his daughter) have been challenged. The childism concepts of power asymmetry, socialisation, and devaluing of children's bodies, autonomy, and self-determination have been utilised to offer a more childist interpretation of the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter. In fine, this article is an attempt to recognise the inherent dignity, voice, agency, autonomy, and self-determination of Jephthah's daughter and other Old Testament children in a similar situation.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

Z.N. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the authors.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, or agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Bae, H.S., 2023, 'New approaches to Jephthah's vow: Antanacsis (Jdg 10–11)', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 48(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03090892231182167>
- Biswas, T., Wall, J., Warming, H., Zehavi, O., Kennedy, D., Murriss, K. et al., 2023, 'Childism and philosophy: A conceptual co-exploration', *Policy Futures in Education* 22(5), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231185178>
- Butler, J., 1993, *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Dube, M.W., 2010, 'Intercultural biblical interpretation', *Swedish Missiological Themes* 98(3), 360–388.
- Faulkner, J. & Zolkos, M., 2015, 'Introduction', in J. Faulkner & M. Zolkos (eds.), *Critical childhood studies and the practice of interdisciplinarity: Disciplining the child*, pp. ix–xvii, Lexington Books, New York, NY.
- Hens-Piazza, G., 2003, *Nameless, blameless, and without shame: Two cannibal mothers before a King*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, PA.
- Maromo, J., 2024, 'He was in possession of body parts: Limpopo dad arrested for brutally killing his two-year-old son, cutting up toddler's body', *IOI*, 07 October, viewed 14 November 2024, from <https://www.ioi.co.za/news/crime-and-courts/he-was-in-possession-of-body-parts-limpopo-dad-arrested-for-brutally-killing-his-two-year-old-son-cutting-up-toddlers-body-aa7e06c9-dd25-42d2-a13a-7b1b305b5db64>.
- Muhlbacher, S. & Sutterluty, F., 2019, 'The principle of child-autonomy: A rationale for the normative agenda of childhood studies', *Global Studies of Childhood* 9(3), 249–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610619860999>
- Mutsila, L., 2024, 'Tragic deaths of six Soweto children linked to lethal organophosphate poisoning: An investigation ongoing', *Daily Maverick*, 28 October, viewed 14 November 2024, from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-10-28-naledi-childrens-deaths-caused-by-restricted-pesticide-ministers/>.
- Ngqeza, Z., 2024a, 'I'm not your little boy but a king's servant: Re-reading 1 Samuel 17 through representation', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2838>
- Ngqeza, Z., 2024b, 'Ikwekwe yinja (a boy is a dog): Re-humanizing children and childhoods in Matthew 2:1–3 & 16–18 in light of the boy-child debate in South Africa', in L. Nortje-Meyer & N.M. Van Velden (eds.), *The thinker: Special issue on violence against children*, pp. 27–36, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg.
- Smit, L.A., 2018, *Judges: Brazos theological commentary of the Bible*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Spronk, K., 2019, *Judges: Historical commentary on the Old Testament*, Peeters, Leuven.
- Sutterluty, F. & Tisdall, E.K.M., 2019, 'Agency, autonomy, and self-determination: Questioning key concepts of childhood studies', *Global Studies of Childhood* 9(3), 183–187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610619860992>
- Tatlock, Z., 2020, 'The Deuteronomistic endorsement of sacrificing errant individuals as reflected by the Hebrew terms HEREM and BI'ER', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 65(2), 297–324. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jss/fgaa023>
- Turk, V., 2024, 'UN report condemns civilian toll: 70% of Palestinians killed are women and children', *Al Jazeera*, 08 November, viewed 14 November 2024, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/8/nearly-70-percent-of-deaths-in-gaza-are-women-and-children-un>.
- Wall, J., 2022, 'From childhood studies to childism: Reconstructing the scholarly and social imagination', *Children's Geographies* 20(3), 257–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912>
- Wall, J., 2023, 'Why philosophy needs childism', in T. Biswas, J. Wall, H. Warming, O. Zehavi, D. Kennedy, K. Murriss, et al. (eds.), *Childism and philosophy: A conceptual co-exploration. Policy futures in education*, pp. 3–4, Sage Publishing, Thousand Oaks.
- Warming, H., 2023, 'A critical stand toward adultism', in T. Biswas, J. Wall, H. Warming, O. Zehavi, D. Kennedy, K. Murriss, et al. (eds.), *Childism and philosophy: A conceptual co-exploration. Policy futures in education*, pp. 6–8, Sage Publishing, Thousand Oaks.
- Webb, B.G., 2012, *The book of Judges: The new international commentary on the Old Testament*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Wong, G.T.K., 2012, *Commentary on Judges*, BakerBooks, Grand Rapids, MI.