THE ENGLISH POETS' "RITZPAH"

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The Second Book of Samuel (chapters 3 and 21) tells the story of Ritzpah, an 11th century BCE Israelite woman whose despair at the death of her sons is a paradigm of motherly love and devotion. Several English-language poets utilize the story as a framework for their own treatment of a mother's fierce defense of her children, at the same time adding to our understanding of the story itself and enhancing the woman's role in biblical events. It is this second aspect which the present paper addresses. It does not imply that the Tanakh lacks dynamic women, especially in the period before Ritzpah, but it may be that the image of women had declined and the poets' treatment of Ritzpah indicates its rehabilitation.

THE BIBLICAL STORY

There are two – interconnected - stages in the story, connecting Ritzpah's private emotions with political developments.

STAGE 1

II Samuel 3:7 introduces to us Ritzpah the daughter of Ayah. She is a *pilegesh*, a royal concubine: *pilegesh* can also mean a legal though secondary wife (it possibly derives from the Biblical Hebrew *p-l-g*, "part" or "half"). After the death of King Saul on Mount Gilboa, Ritzpah seems to have resided with Ishboshet, a son of Saul. Scandal and drama ensue when Ishboshet accuses Avner the son of Ner, Saul's cousin and army commander, of having lain with Ritzpah for not only romantic but political purposes (verse 7). The protest against Avner implies that marriage with a dead king's concubine is tantamount to a claim to the throne (cf. 12:8, 16:21). Avner hits back at Ishboshet (verse 8) with loaded words and heavy sarcasm – *Am I a dog's head from Judah? Here I have been loyally serving the House of your father Saul and his kinsfolk and friends, and I have not betrayed you into the hands of David; yet this day you reproach me over a woman!*

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The conflict leads to Avner switching sides and transferring his support to Ishboshet's rival, David, though he himself is finally killed by David's military commander. After two years on the throne, Ishboshet is murdered at Hebron by Rekhav and Ba'anah, the sons of Rimmon the Be'erite. Ishboshet's head was carried to David, who buries it and kills the assassins. With the death of Ishboshet, the dynasty of Saul comes to almost its end.

Whilst Ritzpah's part in this story seems rather passive and the conflict rages about her and her status without her apparently being personally affecting the events, the wider repercussions are political and affect the destiny of the royal dynasty.

STAGE 2

The second Ritzpah episode, inserted in II Samuel 21 as an addendum to the story of David's incumbency, moves her right into the limelight as an enraged mother defending her children even in death, forcing David to take decisive action in the interests of national stability and morality.

The context is a three-year famine which is blamed on Saul's attack on the Gibeonites in contravention of a treaty obligation (Joshua 9:15). Seeking to make peace, David delivers seven of Saul's male descendants to the Gibeonites, including Ritzpah's sons Armoni and Mephiboshet, who appear to be innocent victims of political intrigue, though as we shall see this was disputed by the Talmudic rabbis. The Gibeonites execute the seven men: *they impaled them on the mountain before the Lord* (verses 6-9), and the bodies of the dead are now left unburied as a mark of shame.

The bereaved mother Ritzpah, torn by the execution and the denial of normal burial, now vigilantly watches over the bodies of her sons, protecting them from birds by day and wild animals by night. In this way several months elapse until the coming of the rains in the autumn. Moved and impelled by Ritzpah's vigil, a private act which must have become a public scandal, David finally allows all seven men to be buried, together with the bones of Saul and Jonathan who had died in battle (verses 13-14; I Sam. 31:1-6).

The outcome of these events, articulated as Chapter 21 proceeds, brings Ritzpah to public notice by her protest against what she sees as the immorality of her sons' fate in contravention of the law in Deuteronomy 24:16 which

says children must not be put to death for the deeds of their father (though the Talmud in Yevamot 79a hints at punishable sins of their own, and Kimhi thinks the sons might have been involved in the treacherous attack on the Gibeonites). Ritzpah believes they were put to death not for their own sins but for political reasons, in revenge for the way their father Saul had treated the Gibeonites (Joshua 9) and is sure an example has been made of the two of them as well as five sons born to Adriel by Saul's daughter Merav (II Sam. 21:8). All seven bodies are left hanging for many weeks by the Gibeonites.

Ritzpah sits on a rock on mourner's sackcloth (or perhaps the sackcloth is a tent covering to protect herself from the elements) and lovingly guards the seven bodies from the birds and animals. It is not certain how long the vigil lasts. It could be seven months starting with the cutting of the Omer (Lev. 23:10-14) and concluding in about November. During this time the corpses are probably reduced to bones. Eventually David takes note and has all seven bodies buried in the sepulcher of their ancestor Kish together with the remains of Saul and Jonathan. This act not only brings David some credit but terminates the famine: *God responded to the plea of the land* (II Sam. 21:14: Midrash Num. R. 8:4). Maybe she finally achieves closure by accepting the sons' fate as God's will. In any case she secures burial both for her own sons and the other royal princes. Though a woman would not usually become involved in public events, she saves the land and the nation from continued famine and changes the political landscape. The text tells the story in matter-of-fact fashion but it leaves the door open for the modern poets to more or less use it to celebrate feminist initiative and rehabilitate the image of women.

To assess the image and personality of Ritzpah properly, however, we would need to know more about her family dynamics – her relationship with Saul, her role (if any) in his monarchical incumbency, her relationship with her sons, and the position of women in general in that period. But we are probably not ready for that assessment yet.

Despite the drama of the story, few Jews have ever heard of Ritzpah and her protective instinct, her protest and vigil, though rabbinic commentary is aware of her deeds. Gentiles seem to know more about her than Jews, possibly because she might prefigure Jesus' mother Mary who (together with other women) mourned for her crucified son at the time of Pontius Pilate, as rec-

orded in the New Testament narratives (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40,47, 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-13; etc.). It may be significant that it is gentile, not Jewish, English-language writers who produce poems about Ritzpah.

Biblical literature is full of grieving mothers. The mother of Sisera sits by the window and wonders why her son's chariot does not come home (Judg. 5:28). Rachel weeps over her lost children (Jer. 31:15). Even God Himself is like a mother who mourns (Isa. 66:13). Ritzpah's lament and vigil is part of this tradition as a mother who grieves for her sons, torn apart by their death as by their birth (cf. II Sam. 14:4-20).

IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Ritzpah figures in the English-language poetic corpus of several countries, especially England, the United States and Australia. Three poets in particular address the subject, all giving their poems the simple name "Rizpah".

They use the story for their own purposes, but that is another subject. Our concern is the question, what do these poets contribute to our understanding of the Biblical text itself? The answer in regard to William Cullen Bryant seems to be "Nothing". He appears to limit himself to the story itself and merely gives it a rhetorical rephrasing. Seeing the dramatic possibilities of the incident, he rewrites the events. We first think that he does not really add a new dimension of understanding to what happened but makes it more memorable, building a stark brief Biblical narrative into an exciting drama. Then we realize that he does something which the Bible story does not: *he gives Ritzpah a voice.* She is no longer more or less reactive, carried hither and thither by events but not controlling them. Now she speaks out, in deeds if not in words.

Two other poets, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Henry Kendall, take the Ritzpah story as a metaphor for social injustices that occur and recur in history. Many things take place which are not fair. In spite of protest, they do happen: innocent sons get caught up in conflagrations; powerful people victimize the innocent; there is little mercy for mothers left to mourn and even lose their reason out of anguish; in anti-feminist prejudice, women are blamed for whatever goes wrong. These are important themes, but the poets don't seem to add to our understanding of the story: they see it repeated over and over again, they use it as a symbol, they depict the maternal anguish that often

bursts into uncontrollable emotion. But at the same time they do add a dimension to the Ritzpah story, allowing a woman to emerge from the shadows and shape political events. Without these poets, the Ritzpah period might be one of those stages of Biblical history when women remained in the background whilst most of the action was in male hands. The Ritzpah they fashion comes out of obscurity and becomes a person. However, the rabbinic sages did not always like dynamic women; in regard to Deborah, for instance, some Talmudic sages endeavored to detract from her power and initiative (TB Meg. 14a-b).

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809-92)

The leading poetic contributor to this process is the English poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson,[1] whose poem "Rizpah" is probably one of his best works, acclaimed even by his critics,[2] though its literary and psychological dimensions are a subject of debate amongst the scholars. It seems to be part of Tennyson's corpus of memorial poems for his friend Arthur Henry Hallam.[3] In a way reminiscent of Sisera's mother waiting for her warrior son to come home (Judg. 5:28), it depicts a mother wailing for her son Willy who has been arrested, imprisoned and taken out to die.

Tennyson's poem is a moving melodramatic monologue though somewhat overblown. The poet is writing against the background of the Victorian way of death in which child mortality left countless mothers bereaved and desperate for an epithet for the little tombstones, though death, like sex, was not generally talked about explicitly in those days. Tennyson's "Rizpah", however, does not mourn dead children but an adult son who was executed "for a show", suggesting that he was the victim of bad company and official vindictiveness, and was executed for a minor crime. This sees the poem as a protest against injustice, a phenomenon that – exemplified in the Ritzpah story – is as old as the Bible. Tennyson's Ritzpah says:

He lived with a lot of wild mates, and they never would let him be good;
They swore that he dare not rob the mail, and he swore that he would…
I came into the court to the judge and the lawyers, I told them my tale;
God's own truth – but they kill'd, they kill'd him for robbing the mail.
They hang'd him in chains for a show – we had always borne a good name –

To be hang'd for a thief – and then put away – isn't that enough shame?
Then since I couldn't but hear that cry of my boy that was dead,
They seized me and shut me up: they fasten'd me down on my bed.
"Mother, O mother!" he call'd in the dark to me year after year –
They beat me for that, they beat me – you know that I couldn't but hear…
Flesh of my flesh was gone, but bone of my bone was left –
I stole them all from the lawyers – and you, will you call it a theft? -
My baby, my bones, that had suck'd me, the bones that had laughed and had cried –
Theirs? O no! they are mine – not theirs – they had moved in my side.

Whilst it is tempting to see Tennyson's poem as just sentimentality ("smothering maternity") and sympathy for a woman's woes, or even a (mere) protest against injustice, Roger Platizky (*A Blueprint of His Dissent: Madness and Method in Tennyson's Poetry*)[4] looks at it in the context of madness in poetry. Mental disturbance in poetry is not limited to males but can reflect "a despair so deep that it leads to madness in a mother". From this point of view, "Rizpah" has a major psychological dimension. The Biblical Ritzpah is then an early embodiment of the phenomenon of the "mad" mother. But this is not the only insight that Tennyson's poem contributes to our understanding of the Ritzpah story. More significant is the fact that he gives a Biblical woman the opportunity of moving out of the wings and onto the stage.

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT (1794-1878)

Amongst the American writer William Cullen Bryant's range of poems about death such as "Thanatopsis", is his "Rizpah". It is not widely known or universally liked: Poe says, "We like it less than any poem yet mentioned…"[5] Bryant more or less limits himself to the Biblical narrative but hones in upon the mother's fierce devotion and shattered mind. It does not identify those who decided the sons must die but it implies that they could have shown more clemency. Yet Bryant gives the story more substance by recasting it. His re-telling of the story has its greatest value in that a concubine becomes a major player and speaks out. In the Biblical story she has

hitherto been a minor character, but now everything has changed. Emotion has stirred her up. Now she has a voice. Now she is articulate:

The low, heart-broken, and wailing strain
Of a mother that mourns her children slain.
I have eaten the bitter herb of the rocks,
And drunk the midnight dew in my locks.
I have wept till I could not weep, and the pain
Of my burning eyeballs went to my brain.
Ye were foully murdered, my hapless sons,
By the hands of wicked and cruel ones;
Ye fell, in your fresh and blooming prime,
All innocent, for your father's crime.
Oh, what an hour for a mother's heart,
When the pitiless ruffians tore us apart!
I clung to my sons with desperate strength,
Till the murderers loosed my hold at length,
They died – and the mother that gave them birth
Is forbid to cover their bones with earth.

HENRY KENDALL (1839-82)

Henry Kendall, a civil servant and bush poet, is regarded by some literary scholars as Australia's finest poet. His poetry, well received in England, was praised for its poetic feeling and "melodious writing". Like Bryant, he retells the story based on the Biblical narrative, but he goes further by applying it to the contemporary condition. He first tells the story, taking some literary license:

Three nightfalls past, saw dark-eyed Rizpah, clad
In dripping sackcloth, pace with naked feet
The flinty rock where lie unburied yet
The sons of her and Saul, and he whose post
Of watch is in those places desolate,
Got up, and spake unto thy servant here
Concerning her – yea, even unto me –

"Behold", he said, "the woman seeks not rest…"

Applying the poem to contemporary conditions, Kendall writes of "women waiting day by day" for sons who will never return. He speaks of war even though he has no way of predicting the 20th century horrors of the First and Second World Wars and subsequent conflicts. He adds a dimension which reflects the vast distances between Australia and Europe, whereby losses in far-away wars such as the Crimean conflict eventually boomerang upon antipodean life and end up with Australian Ritzpahs "losing their households through no sin of theirs":

We have our Rizpahs in these modern days
Who've lost their households through no sin of theirs,
On bloody fields and in the pits of war;
And though their dead were sheltered in the sod
By friendly hands, these have not suffered less
Than she of Judah did, nor is their love
Surpassed by theirs…
…Every letter brought a faintness on
That made her gasp before she opened it,
To read the story written for her eyes,
And cry, or brighten, over its contents.

Once again we see a poet who gives a rehabilitated Biblical woman a voice, a presence, and (in modern terms) a punch.

EXCURSUS: RITZPAH'S NAME

The name Ritzpah is often transliterated as Rizpah, though the "z" is not a *zayin* but a *tzadde*. A similar problem of transliteration is *Mizpah* ("watch tower": Gen 31:44-49) where we woiuld expect *Mitzpah*. Ritzpah is from the root *r-tz-f* and has two lines of possible derivation:

1. A root that means *to glow*, hence *ritzpah* = a baking-stone or glowing coal. Describing the heavenly world, Isaiah 6:6 cites a seraph with a *ritzpah* in his hand. A plural form of the word is found in I Kings 19:6.

2. A root that means *to pave*, to fit together a mosaic of small stones. Song of Songs 3:10 speaks of Solomon's covered palanquin (litter) being tessellated or inlaid. Tessellated paving is found in Solomon's Temple: II Chronicles 7:3, in Ezekiel's Temple and Ezekiel 40:17-18, 42:3, and additionally in Ahasuerus' palace (Esther 1:6). *Ritzpah* – from rabbinic times if not earlier – is the Hebrew word for a floor or pavement. In Freemasonry, meeting rooms have a tessellated floor, with a checkerwork design of alternating black and white tiles arranged like a crossword. The word "tessellate" derives from a Latin root meaning a small cube. There are several theories of Masonic origins. There is little doubt that the formulative period of the movement was the 18th century, when the English language began to use the word "tessellated".

The name Ritzpah could indicate either (or both) of these two options, suggesting either passion or sexual heat (Option 1) and/or symmetrical appearance (Option 2). All the family names are significant. Her father was Ayah, whose name means a falcon. Her husband was Saul (Sha'ul, "asked for": perhaps "chosen for kingship". She bore two sons, Armoni - "of the palace", indicating royal birth and upbringing; and Mephiboshet, "scatterer of shame", which could hint at an unsavory reputation (either his own or one connected with his parentage).

NOTES

1. J.H. Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poe*t (Harvard U.P., 1961), J.D. Jump (ed.), *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1967), A. Quiller-Couch (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939).

2. Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) was critical but respectful of Tennyson, who in turn questioned Swinburne's literary sensuality and atheism: see C.B. Stevenson, "Swinburne and Tennyson's Tristam", *Victorian Poetry* 19:2, 1981, pp. 1865-9.

3. Arthur Henry Hallam (1811-23): the subject of Tennyson's "In Memoriam", 1850.

4. Roger Platizky, *A Blueprint of His Dissent: Madness and Method in Tennyson's Poetry* (Bucknell Univ. Press, 1989), ch. 5.

5. *The Works of... Edgar Allen Poe* (vol. 3, 1850), pp. 178-88.