

The Disclosure of Porousness in the Binary Oppositions Concerning Gender in Judges 1:11-15*

Yong-Hyun Cho(Honam Theological University and Seminary)

1. Introduction¹

As Trent C. Butler highlights, Judges 1:11-15² showcases the prominent role of the tribe Judah in the conquest of Canaan and anticipates the emergence of the first judge Othniel.³ However, much

* This paper was supported by the Research Fund of Honam Theological University and Seminary for 2024.

1 This paper is based on my presentation at the 6th Han-Hun Theological Forum, held at Honam Theological University and Seminary on April 24, 2024.

2 Judges 1:11-15 is commonly referred to as 'the story of Achsah' or 'the story of Judah's conquest' from a broad perspective. However, I refrain from using such titles incorporating personal names in this paper because they can potentially introduce hierarchical implications regarding the question, "Whose story is it?" or "Who are the subject and the object?" Given that the aim of this paper is to deconstruct binary oppositions related to gender, particularly concerning the subject and object in the text, I deliberately opt for the term 'Judges 1:11-15' to denote the passage.

3 Trent C. Butler, *Judges* (Word Biblical Commentary 8; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 23.

scholarly energy has been invested in this passage not only due to its parallels with Joshua 15:13-19,⁴ but also because it presents Achsah in a positive light, emphasizing her proactive request for a field and her acquisition of springs of water. Such a description portrays Achsah as both the subject, rather than the object, in the text and a woman who boldly undertakes actions within the patriarchal framework.⁵ In particular, Achsah can be likened to other female characters depicted in the book of Judges, who are often mistreated. These women are portrayed negatively as objects subjected to the actions of male protagonists in the text and as victims who suffer attacks, injuries, rape, or even death at the hands of powerful males.⁶

-
- 4 For instance, Serge Frolov, by examining the parallels between Judges 1:11-15 and Joshua 15:13-19 with a focus on “the theme of leadership,” argues that Caleb’s role in Judges more distinctly resembles “an act reminiscent of a royal grant.” Serge Frolov, *Judges* (The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 6B; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 43-50. Moreover, J. Cornelis de Vos identifies two common features between Joshua 15:13-19 and Judges 1:10-15. He notes that these passages exhibit a significant divergence from their respective “context[s]” and present an intriguing “course of events.” J. Cornelis de Vos, “The Caleb-Achsah Episode: Judges 1:10-15”, Shelley L. Birdsong, Jacobus Cornelis de Vos, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim (eds.), *Reading Gender in Judges: An Intertextual Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 89. Furthermore, Lawson Stone’s analysis of the Hebrew phrase *הַבָּטִיחַ הַיָּנִיּוֹר* (*haqātōn mimmennū*), meaning “the one younger than him,” in Judges 1:13 compared to its parallel in Joshua 15:17, suggests that the author of Judges may have intentionally lowered the age of the individual who “marri[es] Caleb’s daughter.” Lawson Stone, *Judges* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 3; Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2012), 215.
- 5 Tammi J. Schneider, “Achsah, the Raped Pileges, and the Book of Judges”, Elizabeth A. McCabe (ed.), *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 45.
- 6 Richard D. Nelson, “What Is Achsah Doing in Judges?”, Calvin J. Roetzel and Robert L. Foster (eds.), *The Impartial God: Essays in Biblical Studies in Honor of Jouette M. Bassler* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 21. In the text above, the phrase “they [other female characters] are negatively described” does not imply blame directed at the female characters for their tragedies. Instead, it refers to the portrayal of these characters in the book of Judges through negative events such as human sacrifice, sexual temptation, gang rape, and murder. In relation to the violent incidents involving women in Judges 19-21,

The unusual portrayal of the female character Achsah in Judges 1:11-15 has sparked two interpretations, particularly in regard to her action, ‘to incite him’ (וַתְּסִיֵּבֵהוּ [wattēsītēbhū/and she incited him]), in verse 14a of the Masoretic Text (MT) within the context of ancient patriarchy.⁷ The first interpretation, exemplified by the Septuagint (LXX), reinforces the male-dominant paradigm by shifting the subject of the action ‘to incite him’ from Achsah to her husband Othniel.⁸ As Jack M. Sasson suggests, the LXX limits “Achsah’s motivation and initiative,” thus emphasizing the central role of her husband Othniel.⁹ Conversely, the second interpretation challenges the patriarchal viewpoint by presenting Achsah as an exemplary model of femininity. For instance, Lillian R. Klein portrays Achsah as a strategist who “knows how to live within the constraints of her society” and as “an ideal woman for all Israelite women to emulate.”¹⁰

Dae-Jun Jeong argues that the passage should be read as a narrative demonstrating that “YHWH is the sole king for the Israelites”. Dae-Jun Jeong, “A Coherent Reading of the Violence Incidents in Judges 19–21”, *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 90 (2023), 131.

- 7 The MT of Judges 1:14a can be literally translated as follows: “When she came to him, she incited him to ask her father for the field.” Thus, the MT of Judges 1:14a brings about a textual ambiguity regarding the unclear object to whom Achsah came and incited. As noted by Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, the phrase ‘to incite him’ (וַתְּסִיֵּבֵהוּ [wattēsītēbhū/and she incited him]) suggests her action in a scenario where “she encounters her husband or father.” Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1: A Commentary on Judges 1:1-10:5* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 92. Yet, the textual context of the MT suggests that Achsah would come to her husband, Othniel, and incite him.
- 8 Ibid., 92; Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (The Anchor Bible 6A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 51. While the LXX A (*Codex Alexandrinus*) alters the subject and object regarding the action to incite (‘he urged her’), the LXX B (*Codex Vaticanus*) specifies the subject who incites her by adding his name, Gothniel (‘Gothniel urged her’).
- 9 Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible, Volume 6D; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 146.
- 10 Lillian R. Klein, “Achsah: What Price This Prize?”, Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 26.

In a similar vein, A. Rebecca Basdeo Hill views Achsah as “an ideal female character whose story shows that women act, speak, and are named at the beginning of the book.”¹¹ However, Judith McKinlay harbors suspicion against Achsah’s action ‘to incite him’ in the MT, suggesting it could be interpreted as a “purposeful pillow talk.”¹² Regardless of whether one’s stance on the male-dominant system, these two interpretations, striving to uncover a singular meaning within the text, ultimately perpetuate in a hierarchical gender dynamics.¹³

Regarding the unequal interpretations of Judges 1 : 11-15 concerning gender, Danna N. Fewell significantly challenges “the authority of the traditional interpretations” by contesting the notion of a singular meaning in the text, particularly in light of gender hierarchy.¹⁴ Employing deconstructive criticism in her analysis of the passage, Fewell reveals the inconsistencies between the text’s explicit assertions of meaning and the narrative used to convey those assertions. Rejecting the figurative interpretation that relegates the passage to a folk-etiology and thus undermines Achsah’s central role, Fewell argues that Achsah “refuses to be

11 A. Rebecca Basdeo Hill, “Dismembering Israel: The Downward Spiral of the Abuse of Women in the Book of Judges”, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 31 (2022), 202.

12 Judith McKinlay, “Meeting Achsah on Achsah’s Land”, *The Bible and Critical Theory* 5 (2011), 1.

13 Joy. A. Schroeder has recently conducted a study on the reception history of Judges 1 : 11-15, identifying three distinct interpretive approaches. The first approach portrays Achsah as “an obedient wife, or a symbol of the soul at prayer.” The second approach criticizes Achsah “for her assertiveness,” rebuking and blaming her. The third approach presents Achsah “as a positive example” for women in their own time. Joy A. Schroeder, “The Assertiveness of Achsah: Gender and Intertextuality in the Reception History of Caleb’s Daughter”, Shelley L. Birdsong, Jacobus Cornelis de Vos, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim (eds.), *Reading Gender in Judges: An Intertextual Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 55.

14 Danna N. Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism: Achsah and the (E)Razed City of Writing”, Gale A. Yee (ed.), *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 115.

hobbled,” as evidenced by her dismounting from her donkey, contrary to the implications of her name.¹⁵ While Fewell’s deconstructive approach effectively highlights the fluidity of meaning production in the text, it falls short of fully demonstrating how the binary oppositions related to gender are profoundly deconstructed: specifically, the dichotomy between subject and object, and fertility versus barrenness.

On one hand, the hierarchical relationship concerning gender in Judges 1:11-15 is related to the roles of subject and the object within a given action. In the passage, the protagonists do not strictly adhere to either role but instead fluctuate between them. On the other hand, a stereotypical evaluation of the biblical women often centers around their fertility, particularly their ability to bear children. In Judges 1:11-15, Achsah appears to defy patriarchal norms by assertively requesting a gift from her father. However, Achsah’s acquisition of the upper and lower springs ironically ensnares her in the androcentric trap of being seen primarily as a means for the preservation of posterity. Consequently, the binary oppositions concerning gender become blurred. In conducting a deconstructive reading of Judges 1:11-15, my focus lies on the permeable nature of these binary oppositions, rather than on outright subversion of hierarchies. To achieve this objective, I will first provide an overview of deconstructive criticism. Following this, I will provide an exegetical

15 According to the Hebrew lexicons, the personal name, Achsah (*aksá*), derives from the Hebrew word אַכְסָה (*ekes*) which means “anklet” or “bangle.” In addition, the “Arabic cognate” means “to hobble, of camel.” Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 747; Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 824; Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism”, 126-131. Taking note of the shared element between the two meanings attributed to Achsah, namely, “anklet” and “to hobble,” Fewell proposes that “Achsah’s self-determined mobility” would surpass the obstacles associated with her name.

analysis of how the binary oppositions — specifically, subject vs. object and fertility vs. barrenness — are deconstructed in Judges 1:11-15.

2. Deconstructive Criticism

As Fewell points out, deconstruction has a notorious reputation in biblical interpretation, often being labeled as “nihilistic” and subversive.¹⁶ However, this understanding deviates from Jacques Derrida’s own description of his philosophy: “...*Destruktion*, which Heidegger uses, explaining that *Destruktion* is not a destruction but precisely a destructuring that dismantles the structural layers in the system, and so on.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Derrida’s deconstruction aims to reveal “the aporia,” which includes unresolved tensions and inconsistencies. It challenges the notion of ideality by positing that there is no “purely ideal meaning” but rather an “endless series of reverberations.”¹⁸ Deconstruction seeks not to reject all existing interpretations but to critique “the established hierarchies of Western thought.”¹⁹ Regarding these hierarchies, deconstruction aims to demonstrate that the separation of binary oppositions is inherently “porous” or “permeable,” rather than merely subverting existing hierarchical relationships.²⁰

16 Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism”, 115.

17 Jacques Derrida and Christie McDonald, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 86.

18 Craig G. Bartholomew, “Deconstruction”, Kevin J. Vanhoozer(ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 164.

19 David W. Odell-Scott, “Deconstruction”, A. K. M. Adam(ed.), *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 56.

20 Stephen D. Moore, “Deconstructive Criticism”, Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D.

Given the previous definition and theoretical foundation, deconstruction aids in clarifying the multiple meanings and their inherent ambivalence within a text. Consequently, conflicts that are overlooked by non-deconstructive readings are not hidden or repressed but are instead revealed and liberated within the text. Moreover, the “slippery” nature of language supports the premises of deconstructive criticism, which posits that a text has multifaceted aspects and that no single interpretation can be considered privileged.²¹ In this sense, deconstructive criticism paradoxically respects the text and demands a close reading, allowing the interpretive conundrums to contribute to the “elucidation” of the text.²²

3. The Deconstruction of the Subject-Object Opposition

In Judges 1:11-15, several characters make an appearance: the tribe of Judah (v. 11), the inhabitants of Debir (v. 11), Caleb (vv. 12-15), Achsah (vv. 12-15), and Othniel (vv. 13, 14[?]). Consequently, one may pose the question, “Whose story is depicted in this passage?” In other words, who is the primary subject of the narrative? Some interpret Judges 1:11-15 within the context of its literary position in the introduction of the book of Judges (1:1-2:5).²³ This literary context prompts them to designate it as “Jerusalem and the South” in a geographical sense,²⁴ or as

Moore(eds.), *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 99.

21 Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism”, 119.

22 Odell-Scott, “Deconstruction”, 56.

23 Nelson, “What Is Achsah Doing in Judges?”, 12.

24 Boling, *Judges*, 50.

“Judah and Caleb”²⁵ and “Judah at Hebron and Debir with Caleb and Othniel”²⁶ to emphasize the role of the Judahites as the vanguard in the conquest of Canaan. Others view Judges 1:11-15 as a narrative that serves to prefigure and prepare for the introduction of Othniel, particularly his subsequent appearance as the first judge in Judges 3:7-11.²⁷ While the two interpretations of the story shed light on the editorial coherence of the book of Judges, they overlook another character, Achsah, by treating her merely as “the element of the Othniel story.”²⁸ The mistreatment of Achsah not only has incited resistance but has also prompted newer interpretations that emphasize her role as the primary actor who “takes the initiative” in acquiring the water²⁹ and “resists the social stereotype” within the hierarchical relationship between a father and daughter.³⁰ Furthermore, Barry G. Webb contends that Achsah usurps the leadership from “Caleb and Othniel, the two dominant males of the story” through her “shrewdness and resourcefulness.”³¹ Nonetheless, the reinstated role of Achsah as the central figure remains fluid and susceptible in the text, suggesting that the male characters, Caleb and Othniel, also oscillate between the realms of subject and object.

25 J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 18.

26 Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 85.

27 Butler, *Judges*, 23; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (The New American Commentary 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 97.

28 Schneider, “Achsah, the Raped Pileges, and the Book of Judges”, 43.

29 Danna N. Fewell, “Judges”, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe(eds.), *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 74.

30 Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 40.

31 Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 104.

In Judges 1:11-15, it is Caleb who initially takes the initiative by pledging to give his daughter Achsah to whoever takes the city Kiriath-sepher (v. 12). In making this public declaration, Caleb leverages his authority as the leader of Judah and the head of his family within the male-dominant system. By stipulating that the beneficiary of his pledge must be someone who conquers the city through physical strength and martial prowess, namely a warrior, Caleb effectively exploits Achsah as “the incentive for heroism and territorial expansion.”³² This correlation between the heroic task and the award of a woman as a prize is also evident in the narrative involving Saul, David, Merab, and Michal (1 Sam 17:25; 18:17-27),³³ indicating that the exploitation of women as rewards for heroic deeds was not uncommon in ancient patriarchal societies. As a result, the passage reinforces Caleb’s role as the primary decision-maker who asserts authority over the disposition of his daughter as a spoil of war.

While the capture of Debir shifts the focus from Caleb to Othniel in Judges 1:11-15, Caleb still maintains a role as the primary figure in the relationship with Othniel, as he is the one who offers his daughter to him (v. 13). Regrettably, the text does not portray Achsah as the initiator but rather as an object, identified solely as Caleb’s daughter and subsequently as Othniel’s wife, with no indication of her thoughts or actions during the transaction between the two men. From this perspective, the hierarchical dynamic between males and females is reinforced through the portrayal of the former as subjects and the latter as the object in the narrative. However, this male-dominant hierarchy is suddenly disrupted in verse 14, where Achsah takes action to request a field from her father. This verse is

32 Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism”, 127.

33 Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 41.

renowned for its ambiguity, particularly regarding the question of ‘Who incited whom?’ or ‘Who are the subject and the object?’³⁴

Regarding the MT of verse 14a (literally translated as “When she came to him, she incited him to ask her father for a field”), Soggin argues that it is illogical for Achsah to request land from her husband.³⁵ Therefore, Soggin changes the subject of the first verb **בְּבוֹאָהָ** (*bēbō’āhā*/when she came) and the second verb **וַתְּסִיֵּהוּ** (*wattēsîṭēhû*/and she incited him) from Achsah to Othniel, resulting in the following translation: “When *he* came to her, *he* incited her to ask her father for a field.”³⁶ Soggin’s translation chimes with the LXX and the Vulgate. While this alteration clarifies why Achsah sought land from her father more explicitly than the MT,³⁷ but it raises doubts about whether Othniel is portrayed as an honorable hero.³⁸ Moreover, there is no clear rationale for why the amended text is preferable to the MT.³⁹ In contrast to the amended text, where Othniel is depicted as the one incited, the MT reinforces Achsah’s role as the primary actor by presenting her as having

34 Regarding the textual variants among the MT, the LXX, and the Targum of Judges 1:14, Yonghyun Cho provides a detailed analysis of the three texts, particularly in relation to characterization, Yonghyun Cho, “A Textual-Critical Analysis of Achsah’s Story With Focus on the Characterization”, *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 47 (2020), 273-278.

35 Soggin, *Judges*, 22.

36 *Ibid.*, 18; Boling modifies only the subject of the second verb, “when she arrived, he nagged her.” Boling, *Judges*, 51.

37 Paul G. Mosca, “Who Seduced Whom?: A Note on Joshua 15:18//Judges 1:14”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984), 19.

38 Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism”, 128-129.

39 Pong Dae Im also argues that there is no need to necessarily alter the MT, as the same word is used in both Judges 1:14 and its parallel passage, Joshua 15:18. Pong Dae Im, “A Study on the Settlement of the Southern Tribes and the Fulfillment of the Promise of the Land in Judges 1:9-15”, *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 75 (2020), 43.
the MT is preferable to the amended MT or the LXX because the parallel text, Joshua 15:18

control over her relationship with her husband. Nevertheless, the MT does not depict Achsah as an ideal actor because she is still compelled to urge her husband to fulfill her request.

Mosca proposes the alternative translation of verse 14a by interpreting לִשְׁאֹל (liš'ôll/to ask) as a gerund rather than the infinitive construct. Mosca's suggested translation reads: "When she arrived, she beguiled him (*Caleb*), asking from her father arable land."⁴⁰ According to Mosca's interpretation, Achsah does not rely on her husband Othniel but instead takes the initiative to acquire fertile land by appealing directly to Caleb, who holds authority over land distribution to the Judahites. Consequently, Achsah's role as the primary actor and the subject remains intact, while Othniel is entirely absent from the narrative. Although Achsah's significant initiative undermines the patriarchal hierarchy between males and female, Caleb is portrayed as being influenced by his daughter and thus grants her property. Yet, Mosca's translation fails to elucidate why Achsah approaches her father again and repeats the same request in verse 15, suggesting that she may not exert full control over her father's decisions.⁴¹

Schneider addresses the dilemma of verse 14 by interpreting the movement (בְּבֹאֶהָ [bēbō'āh/when she came]) as symbolic of sexual union, thereby defining Achsah's subsequent request as a natural outcome of this intercourse.⁴² Schneider's translation, "he came (*sexually*) to her," is underpinned by the lexical meaning of the verb בָּא (bō'/to come)⁴³ and

40 Mosca, "Who Seduced Whom?", 21.

41 Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 13.

42 Schneider, 12-14.

43 The BDB denotes the verb בָּא (bō'/to come) as "of bride coming into her husband's house." Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *BDB*, 1054; Köhler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, 113.

its usages in various contexts.⁴⁴ This interpretation characterizes Achsah as a woman who devises a plan and promptly puts it into action. However, Schneider's translation confines Achsah to a stereotypical gender role as a woman who utilizes sexual allure, a theme commonly found in the book of Judges.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, this characterization of Achsah does not imply that Othniel assumes a dominant position in his relationship with his wife; rather, his role as the primary actor and the subject is limited to the act of intercourse.

In these respects, Judges 1:14 *per se* does not establish any dominance or subordination regarding the roles of the subject and the object. Since no one is explicitly designated as the subject in the verse, anyone could be the object of another's action. Thus, neither a male-dominant nor a female-dominant relationship is established; instead, the distinction between subject and object is shown to be porous and penetrable.

4. The Deconstruction of the Fertility–Barrenness Opposition

Achsah's distinctive characterization stems from her inheritance of her father's land through her courageous request for springs of water in Judges 1:15. While female inheritance is uncommon in the Old Testament, it is redolent of a notable exception: the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1-11; 36:1-13). However, the inheritance of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers differs significantly from that of Achsah in Judges, as the

44 Schneider, *Judges*, 12. Given that the verb בָּיָא (*bô'/to come*) rarely takes its subject as a woman, Schneider modifies its subject to Othniel.

45 Schneider, 14.

former resulted from a law addressing a father without a male heir.⁴⁶ In Judges 1:11-15, it is noteworthy that Achsah implored her father to grant springs of water in the land of Negeb, where he had placed her, and ultimately succeeded in obtaining them.⁴⁷

As noted by Smith and Bloch-Smith, the land of Negeb is “proverbial for its lack of water (Gen 21:14-15; cf. Ps 126:4)” in the Old Testament.⁴⁸ Achsah’s request for a blessing (בְּרָכָה [bērākā]) aligns with the understanding that Caleb had already bestowed upon her the barren land, namely, Negeb.⁴⁹ This suggests that Achsah would not have been content with Negeb due to its unsuitability for cultivation or habitation. Moreover, the land of Negeb, given to Achsah by Caleb, is commonly interpreted as a form of “dowry” for her marriage to Othniel.⁵⁰ Thus, Achsah’s efforts to expand her dowry depicts her as not only “a shrewd negotiator”⁵¹ but also as a female who boldly challenges her father’s decision.⁵² As Susan E. Haddox observes, Achsah’s acquisition of land also facilitates her husband, Othniel’s establishment of a secure identity as an

46 Heidi M. Szpek, “Achsah’s Story: A Metaphor for Societal Transition”, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40 (2002): 251.

47 The inheritance of Achsah does not result from the fact that Caleb had no male heirs. This point is implicitly bolstered by the statements of 1 Chronicles (2:18, 49; 4:15).

48 Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 95. To quote the HALOT, the Hebrew word בְּגִן (negeb) means “the arid depression south of the Judean hills, the northern part of which becomes rather unstable after periods of rain.” Köhler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, 665.

49 According to Smith and Bloch-Smith, the Hebrew word בְּרָכָה (bērākā) literally means “a blessing” but “denotes more specifically, ‘a grant, estate’ in a sense of “an inheritance from the family estate or, more likely, a dowry.” Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 94.

50 Joseph Fleishman, “A Daughter’s Demand and a Father’s Compliance: The Legal Background to Achsah’s Claim and Caleb’s Agreement”, *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 118 (2006), 355; Szpek, “Achsah’s Story”, 249.

51 Nelson, “What Is Achsah Doing in Judges?”, 22.

52 Schneider, “Achsah, the Raped Pileges, and the Book of Judges”, 46.

Israelite through “the tribal allotment of Judah.”⁵³ The threat of barrenness surrounding Achsah appears to be alleviated by the presence of upper springs and lower springs, which have the potential to enhance fertility in the land of Negev (v. 15b). Nonetheless, Achsah finds herself ironically ensnared in a hierarchical opposition between fecundity and infertility, symbolized by the juxtaposition of a womb and a barren land.

On one hand, Achsah’s statement in verse 15a, which refers to the Hebrew word נֶגֶב (*negeb*), can be literally translated in a territorial sense as “you have given me the land of Negev” (New American Standard Bible) or “the land you have given me is the Negev” (New Jerusalem Bible). These translations employ double-object constructions, where “the land of Negev” serves as the direct object and “me” as the indirect object, implying that Achsah is the recipient of the land in the text.⁵⁴ Consequently, one might interpret her statement as a complaint to her father about inheriting the barren land of Negeb. Yet, if the land of Negev is considered “an accusative of place,” Achsah’s statement can be translated as “you have set me in the land of Negev” (New Revised Standard Version).⁵⁵ This translation aligns with the LXX rendering, which states, “you have given me away in the land of the south” (New English Translation of the Septuagint).⁵⁶ Regardless of whether the land of Negev is interpreted as the direct object or the accusative, it poses a threat to Achsah, symbolizing barrenness and the ensuing challenges of survival.

On the other hand, if Achsah’s statement is interpreted in the sense

53 Susan E. Haddox, “Bizarro Genesis: An Intertextual Reading of Gender and Identity in Judges”, Shelley L. Birdsong, Jacobus Cornelis de Vos, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim (eds.), *Reading Gender in Judges: An Intertextual Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 26.

54 Exum, “Feminist Criticism”, 127.

55 Nelson, “What Is Achsah Doing in Judges?”, 19.

56 Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 149.

of “a metaphor for dryness or worthlessness,”⁵⁷ it can be figuratively translated as “you have given me away as Negeb-land” (JPS Tanakh).⁵⁸ This figurative translation suggests that Achshah perceived herself as being treated unjustly by her father, much like the barren and unproductive land of Negeb. Additionally, considering a dowry as Achshah’s inheritance rather than physical land, this translation implies that she would voice her objections to her father regarding being offered as a dowry and a gift to Othniel. It is noteworthy that both the literal and metaphorical translations portray Achshah as the female who resisted being allocated barren land and being treated as a mere dowry in the patriarchal system.

From another figurative perspective, however, it is possible to consider the land as a metaphor for Achshah’s womb in the sense of reproduction.⁵⁹ As mentioned earlier, verse 14 carries a sexual connotation through verbs such as בוא (*bô’/to come*) and סות (*sût/to incite*), even though the intercourse is implied rather than explicitly stated in the text. This sexual implication related to reproduction in verse 14 is further emphasized in the next verse, where Achshah voiced “an angry complaint to her father” about his mistreatment of her, likening herself to the barren land, that is, Negeb.⁶⁰ Expanding on this sexual implication concerning reproduction, one could infer that Achshah might be at risk of bodily barrenness in addition to the land’s infertility. This inference finds support in the parallel drawn between a womb (רֶחֶם [*rehem*]) and the earth (אֶרֶץ [*eres*]) in the

57 Nelson, “What Is Achshah Doing in Judges?”, 19.

58 Explaining a grammatical feature of the Hebrew word נִתַּתַּנִּי (*nētattāni/you have given me*) namely, the perfect verb with a pronominal suffix, Sasson argues that it offers “the impression of someone doing something to someone else.” For this reason, Sasson undergirds the translation of the JPS Tanakh. Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 149.

59 Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 68; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 26.

60 Niditch, *Judges*, 41.

book of Proverbs 30:15b-16: “Three things are never satisfied; four never say, “Enough”: Sheol, *the barren womb* (וְעֵצֶר רָחַם [*wē’ōṣer rāḥam*]), *the earth* (אֶרֶץ [*’eres*]) ever thirsty for water, and the fire that never says, “Enough.”” (NRSV). In this proverbial saying, the barren womb and the earth are listed as two examples of four insatiable things, akin to the leech that cries, “Give, give” (Prov 30:15a). Although Proverbs 30:16 does not provide a specific reason why the earth constantly thirsts for water, it appears to require continuous watering “to make plants and crops grow.”⁶¹ As noted by Bruce K. Waltke, the barren womb is paralleled with the earth in the sense that both exhibit an unquenchable thirst for “seed[s]” and “water.”⁶²

The parallel between the barren womb and the land that are never satisfied with seeds and water in Proverbs 30:15b-16 intersects with the metaphorical sense of infertility in Judges 1:15a. This intersection suggests that Achsah may be likened to the barren womb within the patriarchy, forced to bear children in order to survive in her marriage to Othniel, much like the land of Negeb thirsts for water to avoid being abandoned. The Hebrew phrase גִּלּוֹת מַיִם (*gulōt māim*/springs of water, v. 15a), which transforms barren land into fertile soil capable of producing seeds, can be interpreted as a euphemism for a blessing that empowers Achsah to bear children for her husband, thereby validating her worth as a woman within society. Seen in this context, Achsah does not outright defy the patriarchy but conforms to the conventional stereotype of a woman valued for her ability to propagate the species through childbirth in the

61 William D. Rebyburn, *A Handbook on Proverbs* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 634.

62 Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 16-31* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 488.

male-dominant system.

The two interpretations of Achsah's statement regarding the land of Negeb give rise to differing perspectives on the outcome of her request. Firstly, if one interprets Achsah's plea as a literal complaint about the arid land or as a figurative protest against Caleb's mistreatment, she ultimately succeeds in achieving her objective — the acquisition of springs. Ostensibly, by granting Achsah the upper and lower springs, Caleb reinforces his authority as the patriarch of the household.⁶³ However, the LXX rendition of Judges 1:15b introduces another layer of meaning through wordplay involving the personal name Caleb. Unlike the MT (“Caleb gave her springs in the upper springs and the lower springs”), the LXX includes the Greek phrase, *kata. th.n kardi,an auvth/j (kata tēn kardia n aytēs/according to her desire)* in verse 15b. Boling suggests that the *Vorlage* of the LXX likely contained the Hebrew word *קְלִבָּה* (*kēlībāh/*her desire) instead of *קָלֵב* (*kālēb/Caleb*).⁶⁴ Not only does the LXX elevate Achsah's dominance over her father, but it also undermines Caleb's authority in matters of inheritance. Consequently, the gender binary opposition in the LXX is more explicitly destabilized compared to the MT. Secondly, if one interprets the land as a metaphor for Achsah's womb in her request, she achieves her objective by receiving the blessing that could mitigate the risk of barrenness. Ironically, Achsah is idealized as an exemplary woman who diligently strives to produce abundant descendants despite her significant resistance to the androcentric structure. Therefore, the binary opposition between fertility and barrenness in the gender role is deconstructed in terms of vulnerability and permeability.

63 In the NRSV, the springs are regarded as the names of certain places, “Upper Gulloth and Lower Gulloth.”

64 Boling, *Judges*, 57.

5. Conclusion

Based on the preceding analysis of Judges 1:11-15, it becomes apparent that the binary oppositions regarding gender in the passage are neither definitively established nor entirely subverted. Upon examining the narrative, it becomes clear that simply applying deconstructive criticism to the text is insufficient in demonstrating alternative interpretations or revealing a complete overturning of hierarchical oppositions. Regarding the gendered separation of subject and object, the characters such as Achsah, Othniel, and Caleb do not firmly occupy one side or the other but instead continuously oscillate between both roles, exacerbated by the ambiguity surrounding the question of “Who incited whom?” within the text. Moreover, the text renders the boundary between fertility and barrenness permeable, depicting Achsah as a woman who boldly challenges patriarchal norms but ultimately succumbs to societal expectations of reproduction. In conclusion, the binary oppositions concerning gender in Judges 1:11-15 are deconstructed, resulting in a porous layer of separation between them.

Bibliography

- Bartholomew, Craig G., “Deconstruction”, Kevin J. Vanhoozer(ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 163-165.
- Block, Daniel I., *Judges, Ruth* (The New American Commentary 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999).
- Boling, Robert G., *Judges* (The Anchor Bible 6A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975).
- Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical*

- Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979).
- Butler, Trent C., *Judges* (Word Biblical Commentary 8; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009).
- Cho, Yonghyun, "A Textual-Critical Analysis of Achsah's Story With Focus on the Characterization", *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 47 (2020), 264-282.
- de Vos, J. Cornelis, "The Caleb-Achsah Episode: Judges 1:10-15", Shelley L. Birdsong, Jacobus Cornelis de Vos, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim(eds.), *Reading Gender in Judges: An Intertextual Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 89-99.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Christie McDonald, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).
- Exum, J. Cheryl, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?", Gale A. Yee(ed.), *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 65-89.
- Fewell, Danna N., "Deconstructive Criticism: Achsah and the (E)Razed City of Writing", Gale A. Yee(ed.), *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 115-137.
- _____, "Judges", Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe(eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 73-83.
- Fleishman, Joseph, "A Daughter's Demand and a Father's Compliance: The Legal Background to Achsah's Claim and Caleb's Agreement", *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 118 (2006), 354-373.
- Frolov, Serge, *Judges* (The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 6B; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).
- Haddox, Susan E., "Bizarro Genesis: An Intertextual Reading of Gender and Identity in Judges", Shelley L. Birdsong, Jacobus Cornelis de Vos, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim(eds.), *Reading Gender in Judges: An Intertextual Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 19-33.
- Hill, A. Rebecca Basdeo, "Dismembering Israel: The Downward Spiral of the Abuse of Women in the Book of Judges", *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 31 (2022), 198-214.
- Im, Pong Dae, "A Study on the Settlement of the Southern Tribes and the Fulfillment of the Promise of the Land in Judges 1:9-15", *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 75 (2020), 37-59.

- Jeong, Dae-Jun, "A Coherent Reading of the Violence Incidents in Judges 19-21", *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 90 (2023), 102-132.
- Klein, Lillian R., "Achsah: What Price This Prize?", Athalya Brenner(ed.), *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 18-26.
- _____, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 68; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988).
- Köhler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Translated by M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
- Matthews, Victor H., *Judges and Ruth* (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- McKinlay, Judith, "Meeting Achsah on Achsah's Land", *The Bible and Critical Theory* 5 (2011), 1-11.
- Moore, Stephen D., "Deconstructive Criticism", Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore(eds.), *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 95-110.
- Mosca, Paul G., "Who Seduced Whom?: A Note on Joshua 15:18//Judges 1:14", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984), 18-22.
- Nelson, Richard D., "What Is Achsah Doing in Judges?", Calvin J. Roetzel and Robert L. Foster(eds.), *The Impartial God: Essays in Biblical Studies in Honor of Jouette M. Bassler* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 12-22.
- Niditch, Susan, *Judges: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).
- Odell-Scott, David W., "Deconstruction", A. K. M. Adam(ed.), *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 55-61.
- Reyburn, William D., *A Handbook on Proverbs* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 2000).
- Sasson, Jack M., *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible, Volume 6D; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
- Schneider, Tammi J., "Achsah, the Raped Pileges, and the Book of Judges", Elizabeth A. McCabe(ed.), *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 43-57.
- _____, *Judges* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000).
- Schroeder, Joy A., "The Assertiveness of Achsah: Gender and Intertextuality in the

- Reception History of Caleb's Daughter", Shelley L. Birdsong, Jacobus Cornelis de Vos, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim(eds.), *Reading Gender in Judges: An Intertextual Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 35-56.
- Smith, Mark S., and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1: A Commentary on Judges 1:1-10:5* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021).
- Soggin, J. Alberto, *Judges: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).
- Stone, Lawson, *Judges* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 3; Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2012).
- Szpek, Heidi M., "Achsah's Story: A Metaphor for Societal Transition", *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40 (2002), 245-256.
- Waltke, Bruce K., *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 16-31* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004).
- Webb, Barry G., *The Book of Judges* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012).

Korean keywords

사사기 1장 11-15절, 해체주의 비평, 성(性), 주체-객체, 비옥-불모

[ABSTRACT]

The Disclosure of Porousness in the Binary Oppositions concerning Gender in Judges 1:11-15

Yong-Hyun Cho

Honam Theological University and Seminary

The purpose of this paper is to explore the porousness of binary oppositions concerning gender in Judges 1:11-15. This passage has garnered significant attention due to the unusual portrayal of a female character, Achsah. Scholars have often diminished her agency, instead emphasizing the role of her husband, Othniel, or presenting her as an exemplary female resisting ancient patriarchy. However, these interpretations paradoxically reinforce hierarchical gender dynamics, thereby perpetuating a dichotomy between male and female. This paper does not seek to subvert the gender hierarchy but aims to illuminate the permeable nature of binary oppositions concerning gender in Judges 1:11-15 through deconstructive criticism.

First, the ambiguous description of Achsah's action 'to incite him' (וַתְּסִיֵּהוּ [wattěsītēhū/and she incited him]) in the Masoretic Text of Judges 1:14a raises the question, "Who incited whom?". Neither the male characters, Caleb and Othniel, nor the female character, Achsah, consistently occupy the roles of subject and object; rather, they fluctuate between these positions. Second, the binary opposition of fertility versus barrenness is addressed through Achsah's request for a field and the acquisition of springs of water in Judges 1:15. While her request could

www.kci.go.kr

be interpreted as a complaint about arid land or a protest against her father Caleb's mistreatment, it can also be seen as her strategic move to mitigate the risk of barrenness and secure fertility. Consequently, this deconstructive reading of Judges 1:11-15 reveals that the distinctions between subject and object, as well as fertility and barrenness, in relation to gender, are blurred and porous.

key words

Judges 1:11-15, deconstructive criticism, gender, subject-object, fertility-barrenness

투고일: 2024년 07월 16일

심사일: 2024년 08월 07일

게재 확정일: 2024년 08월 12일

www.kci.go.kr