

Did Jephthah, a Judge of Israel Sacrifice His Daughter as a Burnt Offering?

by Gary T. Panell

We find the story in the book of Judges of the Old Testament. The period of the Judges is that time after Moses and Joshua, but before the time of the kings. It was a time when the people of Israel would sin by worshiping idols, then God would allow their enemies to get the upper hand, and cause Israel great suffering. Then Israel would call out to the God of Heaven for help and He would send a judge or deliverer to rescue them. Then when they were helped to overcome their enemies, Israel would go back to its old ways and start to worship idols again. Well this is when Jephthah comes on the scene.

You can find this true story in Judges 11 starting at verse 29. I'm sure you have read this passage before and wondered what in the world happened here? Surely God would not allow one of His own Judges that saved Israel, to actually sacrifice his own daughter and get away with it. This is how it looks on the surface, but is this really what happened?

Read it with me before I comment on it please. "Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced *toward* the people of Ammon. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." First this was a very rash promise, but sincere, and I'm sure he meant whatever animal comes out, because he said I will offer "it."

We lived in Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies as missionaries, where many of the people have a house built up over where the animals stay below them. It would make perfect sense to them and to me what Jephthah was saying. He thought an animal would come out, and he was thinking I will sacrifice one of my animals to the LORD as a token of thanksgiving for victory over the enemy. It is all well and good until his daughter comes out, to his horror. Now he is thinking what can I do, this is a vow to the LORD that I made, and vows are extremely serious to God. I personally do not make vows because what would happen if I can not keep them? I'm not talking about giving my life to the LORD or marriage, I mean other vows. Churches always want you to pledge, do not do it, just give the money, but do not pledge or vow. The giving is the important thing. Also people calling, they want me to pledge so much, I say send me the information and I will read it and consider it, but I will not pledge. However, during this time it was a common practice, look at Genesis 28:20.

Keeping a vow was extremely important, Deuteronomy 23:21-23. "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it' for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform,

for you voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.” A promise to the LORD or anyone else is extremely important! However, there were times vows were overruled. Check out Numbers 30:10, “If she vowed in her husband’s house, or bound herself by an agreement with an oath, and her husband heard it, and made no response to her and did not overrule her, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement by which she bound herself shall stand. But if her husband truly made them void on the day he heard them, then whatever proceeded from her lips concerning her vows or concerning the agreement binding her, it shall not stand; her husband has made them void, and the LORD will release her. Every vow and every binding oath to afflict her soul, her husband may confirm it, or her husband may make it void.” Now, of course, this applies only to husbands over wives and daughters, not to their own oath, as in the case of Jephthah.

As we go on in the story something happens that upsets Jephthah. “So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands...When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she *was his* only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, ‘Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it.’” (Judges 11:32-35) He was upset with his daughter who was only doing what she should be doing, and that was to be glad her father had won and was returning.

She too, must have been a believer according to her response. “So she said to him, ‘My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon.’”

There are many Bible Teachers who teach that then Jephthah went on to carry out his promise just like he had said and sacrificed her as an offering to God. The biggest problem with this is that God had commanded that human sacrifice should never happen in Israel. Look at these verses, “You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their god; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” ...”there shall not be found among you *anyone* who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire...” Deuteronomy 12:31, and 18:10. Anyone who would have done these things in Israel would face the death penalty!

“Well, what really happened,” you ask? We have not quite laid all the background. Many Bible teachers will say, “Oh he just went ahead with his vow.” They say this for two reasons. One, because of this verse, “... and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed...” Judges 11:39b, they assume this means he sacrificed her as a burnt offering. Second, they rely on an unsaved historian for the final answer. The historian is, Josephus. I have his complete works in my library and I do refer to him. He is accurate on many things, but he is not perfect, nor is his writings inspired. He is a Jew who worked for Rome as their historian, so he has some valuable things to say, but he is not

infallible. He does not claim to be saved; however, he does have an interesting statement about Christ. The point is we can not say he is the final authority as to what happen here. Here is his statement, "...she only desired her father to give her leave, for two months, to bewail her youth with her fellow-citizens; and then she agreed, that at the fore-mentioned time he might do with her according to his vow. Accordingly, when that time was over, he sacrificed his daughter as a burnt-offering, offering such an oblation as was neither conformable to the law, nor acceptable to God..." (Pg. 118, pp 1, Antiquities of the Jews, Josephus) There are those who would say, "See there Josephus said it; I believe it that settles it!" Not quite so fast, I believe there is more to the story if we will look closer at the context, and also compare Scripture with Scripture as we are instructed to do.

What is the thrust of the context? Is it not her "virginity" that is lamented over, and not her death? If he had in fact sacrificed her, you have several major problems. Why would he not be punished by the people or by God? Why would he be mentioned in Hebrews 11, in the "Hall of Fame" with the heroes of the faith?"

No, the context makes it very clear to a careful reader; he kept her from ever marrying. This may have also kept him from having children because there are none mentioned of his, and she was his only child. Look at the context with me, "Then she said to her father, 'Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my "virginity," my friends and I...'" (Judges 11:37) She was sad over the fact that she would never marry, not that she was sad over the fact that she was going to die. Someone might argue, "Well maybe she was sad because she was dying without ever being able to marry and was also sad because she was going to die." But when you say this you are reading more into Scripture than what it plainly states. Then if you take this argument that she was actually killed by her father, why is there not an outcry from the people? Keeping your daughter from not marring would not have been a problem with the people; it was up to the fathers in those days to give their daughter in marriage or to keep them single.

Look with me at another time in Israel's history when a king of Israel vowed he would kill his son, but the people stopped him. His vow was a rash vow, and he was not punished by God for not keeping his vow, because it was a rash vow. In 1 Samuel 14:24b we take up the story, King Saul says, "Cursed *is* the man who eats *any* food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies." Then we take up the story again after a great victory by Saul's son Jonathan who did not hear his father say, "Do not eat anything until the battle is over." "Then Saul said to Jonathan, 'Tell me what you have done.' And Jonathan told him, and said, 'I only tasted a little honey with the end of the rod that *was* in my hand. So now I must die! Saul answered, 'God do so and more also; for you shall surely die, Jonathan.' But the people said to Saul, 'Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great deliverance in Israel? Certainly not! As the LORD lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.' So the people rescued Jonathan, and he did not die." (1 Samuel 14:43-45)

We learn several things from comparing this passage of Scripture with the one we are looking at in, Judges 11. One, Saul was not killed by God for this vow that he made and broke. He was killed later for going to a witch and other sins he committed, but not for

breaking this rash vow. Second, the people knew it would be sin for even a king to kill an innocent person for a foolish vow that he made. There is not even any hint that the people tried to stop Jephthah, because he was not killing his innocent daughter but keeping her as a “virgin” the rest of her life. That is why the emphasis of the text is on her “virginity,” not mourning over her death because she was “not” sacrificed. Sacrificing her would have been a far greater sin than not keeping his rash vow. Look at how the story closes to see the thrust of the context. So he said, “Go.” And he sent her away *for* two months; and she went with her friend, and bewailed her “virginity” on the mountains. And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. (now notice what it says) “***She knew no man.***”

In those days, not to have children, for an Israeli woman, was almost worse than dying, it meant no future for the family. It meant no security when you reached old age. So this was a great sacrifice of her life in not being able to marry. This was what Jephthah did in lieu of sacrificing her physically, which would have been a terrible sin for Jephthah. No mention is made of such a terrible sin, because it did not happen. What did happen is seen in the rest of the passage. “And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament (this Hebrew word “*lethanoth*,” rendered to “*bewail or lament*,” rather meant to “*celebrate*,” these daughters of Israel went yearly, not to lament, but with songs of praise to celebrate) the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite” To this day, Jewish women admire the sacrifice Jephthah’s daughter made of her life. She lived a holy life only for the LORD, all of the rest of her days.

So to recap, “Jephthah’s daughter would have bewailed her coming death, not her virginity, if she was to be sacrificed. Rather, she bewailed the fact that she would have to live her whole life without husband and children, performing service to the Lord. Yet she was willing to do this, because of her father’s vow and her gratitude to the Lord for delivering her people from the Ammonites.” (Judges 11:38 footnote, *The Defender’s Study Bible*, Dr. Henry M. Morris) Something to keep in mind also is that when Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son, God did not make him go through with it, but stopped him before he actually took his son’s life, and God provided a sacrifice. This is because God only allowed for one such sacrifice, and that was of His own Son Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins. The good news is that He rose again the third day to eternal life. Now if you will accept Him as your personal Savior you will have eternal life as well. God Bless you as you continue to study God’s Word. Everything is not “cut and dried” so to speak. Sometimes we have to dig to find the answers, and that is what God wants, He wants us to dig into His Word, that is perfect, and it will enlighten our souls.

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