

DID JEPHTHAH KILL HIS DAUGHTER?:  
AN EXAMINATION OF JUDGES 11:29-40

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Historical & Poetical Books  
April 15, 2008

Did a father actually sacrifice his daughter to God? The narrative of Jephthah's daughter has frustrated and fascinated readers of the biblical text for centuries<sup>1</sup> and caused at least one individual to call it a text of terror.<sup>2</sup> Differences of opinion exist to this day over the interpretation of the vow that Jephthah made and how it was fulfilled. Some believe that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering, and others maintain that he dedicated her to a lifetime of service to Yahwah and to remain a virgin for the rest of her life. Still others believe that the text is too ambiguous to understand and to make a definite decision.<sup>3</sup> The incident of the unnamed daughter (Judg. 11:34-40) is part of the story of Jephthah found in Judges 11:1-12:7. According to the text, it seems as though Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter to Yahweh. Perhaps even more disconcerting, it seems that God was silent about this incident. Is there enough evidence to prove that Jephthah offered his daughter as a human sacrifice to God?

Jephthah, who was a judge<sup>4</sup> of Israel, had to overcome many obstacles in his life. He was the son of a prostitute and was disowned and driven out of town by his brothers. Since Jephthah and his brothers did not share the same mother, his brothers did not want him to have part in their inheritance (Judg. 11:2).<sup>5</sup> Jephthah settled in the area of Tob, which was near Syria, where he gathered a band of robbers<sup>6</sup> around him,

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 286.

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, *Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 93-116.

<sup>3</sup> David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ruler or leader would be a more appropriate title for the judges in the book of Judges.

<sup>5</sup> David M. Gunn, *Judges Through the Centuries* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 133

<sup>6</sup> R. K. Harrison, "Jephthah" *ISBE* 2:983.

and they would go out and raid with him (Judg. 11:3). Later, the Ammonites attacked Israel. The elders of Gilead asked Jephthah to lead their forces into battle against the Ammonites. Jephthah, understandably so, was skeptical and doubted their sincerity. In the end, Jephthah took leadership and prepared to do battle against the Ammonites. The only way that he would take leadership of the army was if the elders would reinstate his inheritance and make him their head.<sup>7</sup> In the end, probably out of desperation, the elders gave in and reinstated his inheritance and made him head and commander. Before going to war, Jephthah tried to negotiate with the Ammonite king, but he had no success.

While Jephthah was on his way to do battle with the Ammonites, who ironically were related to the israelites,<sup>8</sup> Judges 11:29 says, “Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.” This is an important moment in the life of Jephthah. Only three of the other judges knew what this moment was like: Othniel (Judg. 3:10), Gideon (Judg. 6:34), and Samson (Judg. 14:6,19, 15:4).<sup>9</sup> This moment signified divine sanction of the leadership of Jephthah. Because of the divine presence, Jephthah is now able to legitimize his role as leader and able to procure help from the tribe of Manasseh.<sup>10</sup>

Trible thinks that Jephthah became a victim of his newfound negotiating skills, because Jephthah then makes an astonishing vow in verses 30 and 31; “And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites

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<sup>7</sup> Lawson Younger, Jr., *Judges/Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 251.

<sup>8</sup> J. Arthur Thompson, “Ammon,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* 1:111-112.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Matthews, *Judges & Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 123.

<sup>10</sup> T.M. Willis, “Nature of Jephthah’s Authority,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997): 42.

will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering (Judg. 11:30-31 NIV)."<sup>11</sup> In Scripture, a vow was binding and had to be kept to the letter; and it was not to be lightly made (Prov. 20:25). Individuals, including one's self, or possessions, could be vowed. Nothing that was considered holy could be vowed according to Levitical law and in some circumstances, the vow could be redeemed by a priest.<sup>12</sup> In the New Testament, the only time that Jesus ever refers to vows is to condemn the abuse of them (Matt. 15:4-6; Mark 7:10-13).

In making this rash vow Jephthah seems to continue to try to hone his negotiating skills. He negotiated with the leaders of Gilead, then with the king of Ammon, and now he is negotiating with Yahweh. "God, if you do this, I will do that." But, if anything, his skills went downhill. With the leaders of Gilead, he received everything he wanted (11:4-11), he received a verbal no from the Ammonites (11:12-28), and according to the text, Jephthah received no response from God when he made this vow.<sup>13</sup>

Some scholars like David Marcus seem to think that Jephthah's vow is simply hastily stated,<sup>14</sup> while others like Webb and Block seem to think that Jephthah was trying to manipulate Yahweh when he made this vow.<sup>15</sup> Jephthah was being both manipulative and hasty. "God, if you do this, I will do that." He was making a deal with

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<sup>11</sup> P. Trible, *Texts of Terror* (1984): 97, calls it an "act of unfaithfulness" in which Jephthah attempts to control God's actions.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Levertoff, "Vow" *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* 4:891.

<sup>13</sup> Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 262.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> Barry Webb, *The Book of Judges* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 64. Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 367.

God. The Hebrew language seems to be ambiguous in indicating what was to be offered up as a burnt offering.<sup>16</sup> Was it the intention of Jephthah to offer an animal sacrifice or a human sacrifice?

In Leviticus 1, we learn the requirements for a burnt offering or *ola*. If the animal was a bull or a lamb, it was to be firstborn male, without blemish. It was a food offering to be offered to Yahwah as a pleasing aroma. Nowhere in the Mosaic law were humans to be offered as a burnt offering. In fact, God condemned and forbade human sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:25 and Deut. 12:31).

When Jephthah made the vow, did he really expect an animal to meet him? Bal suggests that in ancient days, animals did not go out to meet individuals returning home.<sup>17</sup> Jephthah must have realized that it was more probable that a human would come to meet him and not an animal. Perhaps he thought of a servant, a family member, or even his own daughter as perhaps the first one who would meet him. That is what made the vow so full of meaning. He knew that when he made the vow it would probably cost him. And it did. It took his daughter away from him.

Jephthah's vow is better understood when compared to the passage in Leviticus 27. This passage tells what should be done with any person or object that is set apart for God. Each had its own method. For example, if a person vowed a certain animal and then decided they wanted to keep the animal, they could. But they had to buy it back at a price one fifth more than the value of the animal. The first eight verses of Leviticus 27 deal with humans who are vowed and instructs the children of God in how to fulfill the

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<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew word for burnt offering is *ola*

<sup>17</sup> Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 45.

vow. A person who was vowed, could not be sold like a piece of property or offered up as a human sacrifice. Neither of these options were allowed by God. The alternative was that individuals would be valued in monetary terms. But Wood points out a notable exception that women in light of Exodus 38:8 and 1 Samuel 2:22 could be devoted for Tabernacle service, since they are women and can do certain things better than men.<sup>18</sup> Exodus 38:8 mentions the “women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting,” stating that women indeed did work around the place of worship and where God dwelled in those early years. Some of the tasks would be cooking, mending, and washing clothes. Later on in Judges there is an account of the daughters of Shiloh. Shiloh was where the Tabernacle was located and it is a possibility that this account is there to show that women were used as servants in the Tabernacle in service to God.

Scholars have debated the ambiguity of Jephthah’s vow for years. Verse 31 states that “I will offer it up for a burnt offering.” Both verb and noun come from the root, *ola*. The words do not connote the idea of death, rather they give the impression of something being given to God<sup>19</sup>. If you compare this to Jephthah’s vow, we see the deeper meaning. No matter what it was, he trusted God, and truly intended to keep the vow that he made to God.

Human sacrifice was practiced in the ancient Near East. Archaeology has proved that child sacrifice did occur. In 1984 *Biblical Archaeology Review* wrote about a dig that contained the remains of children that the Phoenicians had offered as sacrifices to their

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<sup>18</sup> Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, 293.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, 294.

idols.<sup>20</sup> In 2 Kings 3 Mesha king of Moab sacrificed his son as a desperate attempt to ward off the Israelites. Interestingly, because of this hideous practice, the Israelites backed off and stopped attacking Moab. King Ahaz of Judah is condemned because he sacrificed his son (2 Kings 16:3). Unfortunately there are examples of Israel offering their children as sacrifices in Scripture (Jer. 7:31; 19:3-6) and God was angry.

Deuteronomy 12:31 is interesting because it mentions a cultural practice when it forbids the children of God to not become caught up in burning their sons and daughters as offerings to their gods. Also, 2 Kings 17:17 lists the sacrifice of children among the reasons of Israel's downfall. So when Jephthah negotiates with God was he thinking of the burnt offering the way Yahwah directed the children of Israel to do it, or was he thinking as a pagan? Did he simply get caught in making a rash vow and made the mistake of saying "the first thing that comes out of my house I will sacrifice," or did he really want military victory so much, that he was willing to make such a vow, even going as far as human sacrifice? It is possible that Jephthah did intend for the sacrifice to be human, but not by means of death.

The battle against the Ammonites is told in verses 32 and 33. Block writes that since the sons of Ammon lacked clear geographical boundaries, these twenty towns mentioned here became the boundary line between Israel and the Ammonites.<sup>21</sup> God led the way and twenty Ammonite towns were destroyed. The Ammonites were subdued. To the reader of the text, it would appear that the vow that Jephthah made to God was totally unnecessary. It seems to be the much anticipated happy ending. Verses

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<sup>20</sup> L. E. Stager and S. R. Wolff, "Child Sacrifice at Carthage - Religious Rite or Population Control?," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 10 (1984): 30-51.

<sup>21</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 370.

29 - 33 of Judges 11 are exhilarating. Jephthah overcame the odds. With the help of God, the outcast son of a prostitute persevered and made a name for himself.

Then the exhilarating moment vanishes and is replaced with horror. When Jephthah arrived home, his only child was the first thing to come out of his house. His daughter came out of the house dancing and playing the tambourine welcoming her daddy home. One can only imagine the sheer terror of realizing who would be sacrificed in fulfillment of the vow. One argument is that as the victorious warrior would arrive home, women would come dancing out of their houses in ancient days paying tribute.<sup>22</sup> Often, the victorious warrior's own daughters would come dancing to their father's success. Steinberg believes that Jephthah knew his daughter would come out, and thereby had her in mind when he made the vow. But that argument can be refuted when we read of Jephthah's terror in realizing that it was his daughter who first came out of the house. The text tells us that Jephthah tore his clothes in anguish when he saw his daughter (Judges 11:35). He clearly is not expecting her. Verse 34 tells us that this was his only child. And then to make sure the implication of this is clear, it adds, besides her, he had no other children. Some scholars have suggested that Jephthah was being selfish and was not mourning his daughter's fate, but rather his own loss<sup>23</sup> even going so far as to suggest that Jephthah was telling his daughter she had brought him to ruin.<sup>24</sup> It seems that you cannot separate the two emotions. As a father, one can only

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<sup>22</sup> Naomi Steinberg. "The Problem of Human Sacrifice in War: An Analysis of Judges 11," in *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landis*, ed. Stephen L. Cook and S. C. Winter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 114-135.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Cheon, "Reconsidering Jephthah's Story in Asian Perspective," *Journal of Asian and American Theology*, 6 (2003-2004): 32.

<sup>24</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 373.

imagine realizing the horror of losing your own daughter and her fate must go hand in hand with it. It doesn't seem that Jephthah was simply being selfish, he was acting as a father about to lose his daughter should. The last part of verse 35 suggests that Jephthah had reached a point of resignation. He had vowed the vow. According to Mosaic law, he could not take it back. He was going to have to face the consequences along with his daughter. The man who seemed to have made a comeback in life, is now at his lowest point of despair.

Verses 36 and 37 show the true character of this nameless daughter. The logic of this young<sup>25</sup> and unmarried woman was innocent, "Father, you opened your mouth and made a vow to God, and you will have to keep it." Then the daughter of the negotiator, proceeds to negotiate herself. She asks her father for two months to go to the mountains with her companions and bewail her virginity. There seems to be no clear reason for the amount of time that she chose. Scholars agree that she had reached puberty and was fertile, but probably had not been with a man and definitely did not have a child.<sup>26</sup> She was not necessarily bewailing the fact that she would never have sexual fulfillment, rather that she would never experience the joy of motherhood. That is the natural longing of every woman, but especially in the ancient eastern context.<sup>27</sup> The result of the vow as stated in verse 39 is that she knew no man. That seems to suggest that the daughter was relegated to a lifestyle of continual virginity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, 46-49.

<sup>26</sup> Peggy Day. "From the Child Is Born a Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 59.

<sup>27</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 374.

<sup>28</sup> L. Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, 290.

At the end of the two months, the daughter returned home and verse 39 states that Jephthah did unto her as he had vowed. The question remains, what is it exactly that he did to her? We have already looked at what many scholars past and present think he did, and that was to offer his daughter as a human sacrifice to Yahwah in fulfillment of his vow. This viewpoint is the popular interpretation but there is another possibility that seems to be supported by Scripture and some scholars.

The more one studies the vow that Jephthah made, the more confusing it seems to be and even more questions come to mind. Why did he state his vow in seemingly ambiguous terminology. How could he know who or what would be the first thing to come out of his house? It could have been an unclean animal (one would likely expect his dog) and therefore be unworthy of sacrifice. The first thing that came out of his house could have been a total stranger or a child of a neighbor and how would he have been able to fulfill the vow then? A neighbor wouldn't allow him to offer his child as fulfillment of his rash vow. Furthermore, Jephthah would have no right to take a life that cost him nothing and offer it to God as a sacrifice. Even though some scholars seem to believe that Jephthah was a pagan and knew virtually nothing about Yahwah, that seems to be in error. Jephthah gave evidence that he knew at least a smattering of Hebrew Scripture. Yes, the period of the Judges was a dark time in Israel's history and they did many things that were evil in the sight of the Lord. But it is doubtful that even the most unspiritual priest at that time would offer a human sacrifice on the tabernacle altar in Shiloh dedicated to God. Even if a priest would do such a despicable act, the priest couldn't because the sacrifice wouldn't be a male (Lev. 1). To offer a female as a

burnt offering would have been unacceptable as a sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> A hero such as Jephthah wouldn't have been able to hide what he was going to do. It is a certainty that word spread during these two months. Also once they arrived at Shiloh, surely the levitical priest would have told Jephthah that he could have redeemed the vow. Furthermore, in spite of Numbers 30:1-2 which speaks of a vow being binding, would God take a vow seriously that violated human rights and violated His own law? How would an individual who was empowered by God Himself be able to sacrifice a human? Why is God silent about this whole ordeal? It seems that every other time that an individual does something rash and stupid in Scripture, the reader finds out the consequences. Moses disobeyed God by striking the rock to bring forth water and was disciplined. In fact Moses never reached the promised land (Deut. 32:50-52). David was disciplined for committing adultery and having Uriah killed. The text pointed out that David and Bathsheba's child died as a result of their sin (2 Sam. 12:1-23). But in the story of Jephthah and his daughter, the Bible is strangely silent on what happened. Furthermore, if Jephthah did indeed have his daughter killed, why isn't the punishment mentioned? And this isn't the last time Jephthah is mentioned in Scripture. He is mentioned in 1 Samuel 12 as a deliverer that God sent and, even more confusingly, Jephthah is mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 as a man of faith. Can God proclaim Jephthah as a man of faith if he killed his own daughter? The more one examines the questions in this narrative, the more convincing it becomes that Jephthah did not promise to offer a human sacrifice to the Lord and did not kill his own child.

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<sup>29</sup> Solomon Landers. "Did Jephthah Kill His Daughter?," *Bible Review* 7, no. 4 (August 1991): 42.

It is entirely possible, even probable, that Jephthah gave his daughter to the Lord to serve Yahwah at the tabernacle for the rest of her life (Exod. 38:8). In Samuel the story is told of Hannah giving Samuel to the Lord (1 Sam.2:22). Jephthah's daughter would remain a virgin, she would never experience the joys and fulfillment of motherhood. This would also end the lineage of Jephthah which in the ancient world was considered severe punishment.<sup>30</sup> If his daughter was to be killed, why is it that she was only mourning her virginity?<sup>31</sup> It would seem that this wouldn't have been the only thing she would be mourning. If Jephthah had offered the two-month reprieve, that would seem to indicate that the daughter was doomed to die. But for her to suggest it seems to conclude that sacrificial death was not in the works. She was simply off preparing herself for what would be a lifetime of service to God.

Verse 40 ends this account by telling its readers that the daughters of Israel took four days to lament the daughter of Jephthah. Not much is known about the festival, except that it was held each year.<sup>32</sup> Some scholars do feel that the four-day pilgrimage or lamentation of Israeli females was a protest against human sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> It is quite improbable that the people of that day would allow an event commemorating the demise of the daughter.<sup>34</sup> The celebration may not have just been about the daughter who was offered to the service of God, but also to celebrate the victory that was gained at great cost. Day suggests that the festival was held in correlation with celebration of the myth

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<sup>30</sup> L. Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, 291.

<sup>31</sup> D. Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 375.

<sup>33</sup> R. K. Harrison, "Jephthah" *ISBE* 2:983.

<sup>34</sup> Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, 291.

of Kore and Demeter.<sup>35</sup> But then Day believes that the story of Jephthah and his daughter is more legend than reality, so her interpretation is suspect. Pamela Reis believes that this celebration was the pagan celebration of the new moon and that the Jewish people adopted the practice and made it holy.<sup>36</sup> Again, theories such as these are doubtful. Yes, as it has already been pointed out, the days were dark and God was being rejected. But if this was a precursor to adoption of pagan practices, it seems that the author of Judges would be quick to point that out. The word translated as “commemorate” in the NIV and “lament” in the KJV is *tana* which is used only one other time<sup>37</sup> in the Old Testament (Judg. 5:11) and means to rehearse. The idea is that the daughters reviewed this heroic act in celebration.

Even though much literature has been written about Jephthah’s daughter being killed and that Jephthah was a deadly father,<sup>38</sup> there are some redeeming qualities about this story. Jephthah was willing to do whatever it took to gain the blessing of the Lord. Granted, his vow was rash and unnecessary and created problems. Yes, Jephthah didn’t always make wise decisions, and relied on his negotiating skills rather than the spirit of God. But there are some great lessons that we can learn from him and his daughter that serves as an example for current followers of Jesus. God wants committed followers of Jesus. Jephthah also serves as an example that circumstances that you encounter from birth, or something your family does to you, do not put

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<sup>35</sup> Day, “From the Child Is Born a Woman: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter,” 62.

<sup>36</sup> Pamela Reis, “Spoiled Child : A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter,” *Prooftexts* 17 no. 3, (1997): 287.

<sup>37</sup> John Kohlenberger III, and James Swanson, *The Hebrew-English Concordance to the Old Testament: with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1667.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Duncan, “Jephthah, Saul, Agamemnon: Anxious Generals Deadly Fathers” (paper presented at the annual meeting of Midwest Regional Evangelical Theological Society, Chicago, IL, March 22-23, 1991), 1.

limitations upon the person who places his trust in God. He had a respect for God and His will. Jephthah is sometimes pictured as a carefree bandit who had little concern for anything other than himself. But if the story is examined closely, you can see how he had respect for God. He made the covenant with the elders of Gilead before the Lord. He also made the vow and he kept the vow. So one can see his respect for God.

Jephthah is exemplified as a man of faith in Hebrews 11. Perhaps it was shaky faith, but he was still victorious over the Ammonites because of faith placed in God. 1 Samuel tells us that the Ammonites didn't threaten the Israelites for another fifty years (1 Sam. 11). Jephthah kept his promise. He was a man of his word, even though it had to be the most difficult decision that he ever had to make. The daughter was an amazing example of loyalty, humility, and obedience. She serves as a model of how followers of Jesus should act when we go through trials and turmoil and feel like our world is at an end. Many scholars have compared this story to the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 where Abraham was to going to sacrifice his son as an offering to God.<sup>39</sup> Isaac, like Jephthah's daughter was willing, and did it unquestionably.

There is more than enough evidence to suggest that Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter, but not necessarily as a human sacrifice. A better explanation would be that Jephthah gave his daughter to serve at the Tabernacle in dedicated service to God.<sup>40</sup> When comparing the account in Judges 11 to the references in I Samuel 12 and especially in Hebrews 11, it is improbable that God would call Jephthah a person of faith, when Jephthah had his daughter put to death.

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<sup>39</sup> Landers, "Did Jephthah Kill His Daughter?," 31.

<sup>40</sup> Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, 288.

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