

Part Two—the Judges: Jephthah

After the death of Gideon, the Israelites again turned from God. We read:

And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the LORD, and served not him. And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the children of Ammon. And that year they vexed and oppressed the children of Israel: eighteen years, all the children of Israel that were on the other side Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. Moreover the children of Ammon passed over Jordan to fight also against Judah, and against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim; so that Israel was sore distressed. And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, saying, We have sinned against thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim (Judges 10:6-10).

Again, this national punishment brought the Israelites to repentance. “And the children of Israel said unto the LORD, We have sinned: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day. And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD: and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel” (Judges 10:15-16). The threat from their enemies loomed larger than ever. What they now needed was a strong leader who could weld them into a people with a purpose. “Then the children of Ammon were gathered together, and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled themselves together, and encamped in Mizpeh. And the people and princes of Gilead said one to another, What man is he that will begin to fight against the children of Ammon? he shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead” (vv. 17-18). Who could do the job?

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah. And Gilead’s wife bare him sons; and his wife’s sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father’s house; for thou art the son of a strange woman. Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him. (Judges 11:1-3)

Jephthah had become a raider-looting and pillaging the enemies of Israel. He had established a reputation and was well-known. The troubled Israelites knew where to find this man.

And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob: And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon. And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father’s house? and why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayest go with us, and fight against the children of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words. Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Jephthah uttered all his words before the LORD in Mizpeh. (Judges 11:5-11)

These elders had to suffer some embarrassment for their failure to do justice at the time Jephthah’s brothers treated him so unfairly. Jephthah had every right to question their motives, as well as the veracity

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of their word. But they had humbled themselves to come to him and were honest in their intentions. In an oath before the Lord, Jephthah held them to their word. Both parties entered into this covenant in the presence of the Lord at Mizpeh.

And Jephthah sent messengers unto the king of the children of Ammon, saying, What hast thou to do with me, that thou art come against me to fight in my land? And the king of the children of Ammon answered unto the messengers of Jephthah, Because Israel took away my land, when they came up out of Egypt, from Arnon even unto Jabbok, and unto Jordan: now therefore restore those lands again peaceably. And Jephthah sent messengers again unto the king of the children of Ammon: And said unto him, Thus saith Jephthah, Israel took not away the land of Moab, nor the land of the children of Ammon: But when Israel came up from Egypt, and walked through the wilderness unto the Red sea, and came to Kadesh; Then Israel sent messengers unto the king of Edom, saying, Let me, I pray thee, pass through thy land: but the king of Edom would not hearken thereto. And in like manner they sent unto the king of Moab: but he would not consent: and Israel abode in Kadesh. Then they went along through the wilderness, and compassed the land of Edom, and the land of Moab, and came by the east side of the land of Moab, and pitched on the other side of Arnon, but came not within the border of Moab: for Arnon was the border of Moab. And Israel sent messengers unto Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon; and Israel said unto him, Let us pass, we pray thee, through thy land into my place. But Sihon trusted not Israel to pass through his coast: but Sihon gathered all his people together, and pitched in Jahaz, and fought against Israel. And the LORD God of Israel delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they smote them: so Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that country. And they possessed all the coasts of the Amorites, from Arnon even unto Jabbok, and from the wilderness even unto Jordan. So now the LORD God of Israel hath dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel, and shouldest thou possess it? Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess? So whomsoever the LORD our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess. And now art thou any thing better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever fight against them, While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and her towns, and in Aroer and her towns, and in all the cities that be along by the coasts of Arnon, three hundred years? why therefore did ye not recover them within that time? Wherefore I have not sinned against thee, but thou doest me wrong to war against me: the LORD the Judge be judge this day between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon. (Judges 11:12-27)

Jephthah's arguments were: (1) Amon did not possess the land when Israel acquired it. It was taken from the Amorites. (2) Israel had possession of the land for 300 years. (3) The Lord was the One who gave the land to Israel. And (4) No attempt had ever been made to recover the land.

Howbeit the king of the children of Ammon hearkened not unto the words of Jephthah which he sent him. Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon. And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. (Judges 11:28-31)

The Bible does not elaborate on the battle that followed. In a brief statement it says: "So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD delivered them into his hands. And he smote them from Aroer, even till thou come to Minnith, even twenty cities, and unto the plain of the vineyards, with a very great slaughter. Thus the children of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel" (Judges 11:32-33).

This victory did not set right with the Ephraimites who lived west of the Jordan River. Perhaps they wanted in on the booty, or felt that they had been slighted because they were the chief tribe in Israel due of the

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birthright (Gen. 48:17-20).

And the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and went northward, and said unto Jephthah, Wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee? we will burn thine house upon thee with fire. And Jephthah said unto them, I and my people were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands. And when I saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands, and passed over against the children of Ammon, and the LORD delivered them into my hand: wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me? (Judges 12:1-3)

These Ephraimites were spoiling for a fight and refused to accept the facts. Jephthah knew there was serious trouble ahead. “Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites” (Judges 12:4). This insult was the last straw. The Living Bible gives the first part of this verse as: “Then Jephthah furious at the taunt that the men of Gilead were mere outcasts and scum of the earth . . .” determined to put an end to this bullying.

And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. (Judges 12:5-6)

Jephthah, then, returned to his house in peace, but an unexpected turn of events confronted him. The reader will recall that before the battle, Jephthah had made a vow to the Lord.

And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back. (Judges 11:34-35).

Indeed, Jephthah did not consider all the possibilities when he made the vow. But, who could have anticipated such an event? Jephthah knew the importance of keeping a vow. David asked the question: “LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?” His answer included this statement: “He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not” (Ps.15: 1, 4). Jephthah knew that a man is only as good as his word. He had to keep the vow. But the question is this: Did Jephthah really sacrifice his daughter as some believe?

Many Bible commentaries carelessly assume that he did. But there are some factors that need to be considered. For one thing, there are some stipulations attached to the vow. They are: (1) Whosoever met Jephthah would be the Lord's, that is, would belong to the Lord. And, (2) that it would be offered as a burnt offering. See Judges 11:31. The key to understanding what Jephthah meant is the word “and.” The verse states: “Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.” Notice the marginal reference. It uses the words “or I will offer it.” This variable translation of the word “and” gives an entirely different meaning to verse 31. Both “or” as well as “and” are translated from the Hebrew letter vav (?). This letter is often attached to the beginning of a word to form the conjunction “and.” But, vav is translated in many other ways, such words as “so,” “then,” “when,” “now,” “or,” “but,” “that.” There is no hard and fast rule that vav should be translated by the word “and” in verse 31. The text could just as well mean that what came out of Jephthah's house would surely be the Lord's or he would

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offer it up as a burnt offering. The word “house” in verse 31 also has different meanings. It is translated as “dwelling habitation,” “shelter or abode of animals,” “the land of Ephraim,” “place,” “temple,” and a few other words as well. Suffice it to say here, the word “house” could easily refer to the property and possessions owned by Jephthah. In other words, when Jephthah made the vow, he had a choice. If he made the other choice, he did not have to offer it as a burnt offering. Does it make any sense that Jephthah, a great man of faith, would have offered a human sacrifice?

There are a number of reasons Jephthah did not make a human sacrifice? For example, verses 36-40 of Joshua 11 do not indicate this at all. Jephthah’s daughter went to the mountains to bewail her virginity (that is, her status as an unmarried woman). The Bible does not say she went to bewail her death. The daughters of Israel also lamented for her, but it does not say for her death. It makes no sense to think she would bewail her virginity, and not her death, if she were to die. Also, sacrifices were required to be made at the Tabernacle, located in the territory of Ephraim. Any human sacrifice would have been a terrible affront to God. Jephthah had just fought a bloody war with the Ephraimites. It seems unlikely he would go into the territory of Ephraim so soon after the war. No Levite would have participated in a human sacrifice. To perform a vow apart from the Tabernacle would have been a double sin, since Jephthah would have been acting as a priest, which was strictly forbidden. Last of all, Hebrews 11:32 includes Jephthah as a righteous man of faith, which would have precluded him committing such a heinous sin.

Then, what happened to Jephthah’s daughter? The logical answer is that she was dedicated to God’s service, as Samuel was as a child. Her dedication was akin to a Nazarite vow, and she was not released from the vow for the entirety of her life. One other important point has been largely overlooked in the word “lament” used in verse 40. The marginal rendering is “to talk with.” The lamed (?) attached to the noun “daughter” is often translated as the word “to.” It is also translated by the words “at,” “in,” “in reference to,” “of,” “by,” and other words. What this means is that the marginal rendering could very well be correct, and means the daughters of Israel went annually to “talk to,” or “talk with” the daughter of Jephthah—clearly showing that she had not been sacrificed as a burnt offering.

“And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then died Jephthah the Gileadite, and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead” (Judges 12:7).

The account of Jephthah tells us about a man who rose above disadvantaged circumstances—one whose inheritance had been denied—yet who bore neither hatred nor ill-will against those who had wronged him. He was not vengeful and bitter. When called upon during a national emergency, he rose to the occasion. He was a man who elevated himself above his handicap, a man who knew God and was devoted to Him. He was a seasoned and valiant warrior who did not shirk the responsibility given him. He completely understood that success depended upon God. Regardless of the cost to himself and his family, Jephthah was a man of his word. He truly was a great man of the Old Testament.