

# JEPHTHAH'S VOW

from *The Distressing Days of the Judges*

by  
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## Introductory Note

Jephthah was one of the judges in pre-monarchical Israel (see Judges 10-12). The nature and result of the vow he made has long been a point of disagreement among biblical scholars. Even among conservative scholars there are those on either side of this issue. Did Jephthah devote his daughter to Tabernacle service and perpetual celibacy or did he actually sacrifice her on the altar? I strongly hold to the former view, and this discussion by Dr. Leon Wood, late professor of Old Testament Studies at the Grand Rapids Bible Seminary (now part of Cornerstone University), is one of the best and most thorough defenses I have seen. I highly recommend it.

This excerpt is taken from *Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), pp. 287-295. The book as a whole is one of the best commentaries available on the book of Judges, and it is reviewed on this Web site (see "Book Reviews" in the main menu on the home page).

## **1. The story (Judg. 11:30-40).**

Before Jephthah set out on his military advance against the Ammonites, he made a serious vow to God, and this has been cause for much discussion by Bible expositors. The reason for the vow is clear enough; Jephthah wanted to assure the blessing of God on this military endeavor, and he believed a vow of this kind would help. He addressed the vow directly to God, saying, "If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatever comes 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" (Judg. 11:30,31).

Following this, Jephthah moved into the battle and won, God being gracious in so blessing. On Jephthah's return home, however, the first one to meet him was his own daughter who was an only child. On seeing her and remembering the vow, Jephthah was greatly distressed. He had been serious in his vow when he made it, but now to do with this beloved daughter as he had promised was difficult. He told the girl of the vow and stated that he simply could not go back on his promise to God.

The daughter must have been a devout person herself, for she agreed with her father. She made only the one request that she be permitted first to "go up and down the mountains" for a period of two months and bewail her "virginity," along with companions who would accompany her. Jephthah permitted her to do this and then did "with her according to his vow which he had vowed." As a result "she knew no man." The text gives the added note that, because of Jephthah's action, a custom came to be followed in Israel that "the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gildeadite four days in a year" (Judg. 11:40).

The question that has long been debated concerns the manner in which Jephthah carried out this vow. Some believe that Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter in the form of a "burnt-offering." Others believe that he offered her in the sense of devoting her to the Tabernacle for continual service and perpetual celibacy. Substantial arguments can be assembled for both viewpoints, but those which favor the latter are the more convincing. The matter is important enough to list those latter arguments and then give refutation to those advanced in favor of the first viewpoint.

## **2. Arguments in favor of the idea of Tabernacle service.**

**A. Tabernacle service by women did exist.** A first matter concerns whether or not women served at

the Tabernacle, as this viewpoint assumes. Two scriptural passages indicate that they did. One is Exodus 38:8, where women "which assembled" at the Tabernacle are mentioned, and the Hebrew word translated "assembled" really means "served" (root, *tsaba'*). The context suggests that those in reference were regularly present at the Tabernacle, which fits with the idea that they carried on some aspect of service there. The second passage is 1 Samuel 2:22, where women again are mentioned as being regularly at the Tabernacle, and the same word, *tsaba'*, is used.<sup>1</sup> The tasks such women could have performed would have been numerous, including cooking meals, making and mending garments, washing clothes, and keeping the general area clean.

**B. Human sacrifice was contrary to Israelite law and practice.** For Jephthah to have offered his daughter as a human sacrifice would have been contrary both to Mosaic law (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10) and Israelite practice. When one examines Israelite history, prior to the wicked reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh much later (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6), he finds no indication of human sacrifice having been performed, not even by those who greatly sinned in following Baal worship.<sup>2</sup> For Jephthah to have taken his daughter's life, then, would have been unique to the day and disobedient to God's will.

**C. Jephthah had respect for God and His will.** Jephthah sometimes is pictured as a carefree marauder, leading a band of undisciplined renegades, who had little place for God or His law. The story when examined with care, however, presents him in quite a different light; he actually was one who had a high respect for God and His will. The following matters are noteworthy. First, the covenant made with the Gileadite elders was made, "before the LORD in Mizpeh," something to which Jephthah at least had to be agreeable (Judg. 11:11). Second, Jephthah made this vow to God, and, since no other judge or similar person is depicted as doing the same in a time of war, the act cannot be dismissed simply as something routine and insignificant. Third, Jephthah had the integrity to keep the vow, even though it turned out to be difficult for him to do so. Fourth, Jephthah was shown high favor by God in being granted "the Spirit of the LORD" to enable him for the encounter with the Ammonites (Judg. 11:29). Fifth, Jephthah is mentioned later by Samuel in a context of divine approval (1 Sam. 12:11), and he even is included in the honored list of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 (v. 32). Both matters suggest that whatever he did with his daughter was something approved of God and that he was himself in right relation to God.

**D. Jephthah was emotionally balanced.** Jephthah also is sometimes presented as a brash person, given to quick words and unevaluated actions. Again, however, the story shows quite a different picture. It presents him as really a person of remarkable emotional balance. This is evidenced especially by his act of trying the route of negotiation with the Ammonite king, before going to war, and also the manner by which he pursued it. A rash person would hardly have thought of talking with the enemy, rather than fighting.

Jephthah's way of pursuing the negotiation was by careful reasoning with the enemy king. This took balanced planning and thought. It was in no way the type of mental activity one would associate with brashness. And, still further, the attitude and response made by Jephthah's daughter, when confronted with her father's startling information, shows that she too was a girl of emotional balance. This suggests that she had been raised by a father who had set a good example. She displayed high respect for her father, and she, like her father, was commendably submissive to the requirements of God in respect to the payment of vows (Judg. 11:36-39; cf. Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:23).

**E. Priests and public opinion would have been opposed.** If Jephthah would have tried to sacrifice his daughter in death, he would have faced opposition by people of the day. If he would have tried to do this at the one proper place of sacrifice, the Tabernacle, as his piety would have prompted him to do, he

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1 It may be that also the "daughters of Shiloh," who were captured as wives for remaining Benjamites earlier in the judges' period (see chap. 7, pp. 151, 153) were of this group.

2 The only instance given in the Old Testament from this period is that of Mesha, the pagan king of Moab, sacrificing his son (2 Kings 3:27). This was not by an Israelite, however, and it occurred long after the time of Jephthah.

would have had to get the approval of the priests, and this would not have been forthcoming when the action was contrary to the law. If he had attempted to perform the sacrifice in his home country, elders there and the people generally would have objected. It also must be recognized that, with the daughter taking two months in which to bewail her virginity, there would have been ample time for public opinion to form and bring such objection.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is highly questionable if he could have, or been divinely permitted, to serve for six years as a judge if he had broken God's law in this manner.

**F. Significance of the daughter's action for the two months.** That Jephthah's daughter requested and was permitted to bewail her virginity for two months suits well the idea of her soon being devoted to God in perpetual celibacy. It should be noted, too, that this was her request and not an idea proposed by Jephthah. If Jephthah had first suggested it, one might argue that he was lamenting the loss of all chance of progeny, since this daughter was his only child. But the daughter asked for this privilege, and the request would have been meaningful only if she were soon to be consigned to a state of continual celibacy. It would have made no real sense if she were to be sacrificed in death.

**G. No statement is made that human sacrifice was involved.** When the story speaks of Jephthah carrying out the vow, it does not mention the thought of sacrifice by death. One would think that it would have, if a measure that radical was really effected. Rather, it speaks only of Jephthah doing "with her according to his vow which he had vowed," with the result that "she knew no man" (Judg. 11:39). The additional element, "and she knew no man," seems even to state the way in which the vow became effective for the girl; namely, by imposing continual celibacy.

**3. Refutation of arguments in favor of human sacrifice.** It is appropriate now to mention those arguments which are presented in favor of the idea of human sacrifice and give response to them.

**A. Jephthah's excessive grief.** A first argument is that Jephthah showed excessive grief on seeing the identity of the one who first met him on returning home, and that this is understandable only if this meant that now he would have to sacrifice his daughter in death. The response is that Jephthah's grief is understandable also on the basis of his daughter now having to be devoted to a life of celibacy. He would have realized the terrible shock that such news would have for her, in never being able to marry and have a family; and also there would have been emotional recognition in respect to himself that now he could never have progeny. Children meant much to both parents and grandparents in that day.

**B. The mourning of the "daughters of Israel" which followed.** It is asserted that the mourning of "the daughters of Israel" for four days each year after this time is understandable only if this daughter was sacrificed in death. The force of this argument is questionable, however, and actually can be used against the viewpoint. For the question is quite pertinent whether such mourning ever would have started as the result of an illegal action. Even if people of the day, out of some sense of respect for Jephthah, would have permitted him to carry through with a rash act of human sacrifice, it is quite unthinkable that they would have allowed--or anyone even conceived the idea--the observing of a four-day celebration of the event each year following. On the other hand, it is not difficult to understand the starting and continuance of such an annual occasion on the basis of an assigned celibacy to the daughter. The celebration<sup>4</sup> would have been not only in memory of the deprivation suffered by Jephthah's daughter--significant as that would have been in itself--but also of what her deprivation stood for: the great deliverance won by her father over the oppressing Ammonites.

**C. The Transjordanians would not have known the law.** A third argument of possibly greater

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3 Cf. the similar case when the public opinion of Saul's soldiers would not let him take the life of his son Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:39-45).

4 The word used for "lament" (Judg. 11:40) is *tannoth*, which is used only one other time in the Old Testament, where it means "rehearse" (Judg. 5:11). The basic thought here, then, is not so much that these "daughters" lamented the act done to Jephthah's daughter, but that they "rehearsed" or reviewed in celebration what had occurred.

weight is that Jephthah and his neighbors, living east of the Jordan and away from the Tabernacle, may have been ignorant of the law in respect to human sacrifice and also more susceptible to heathen custom which allowed for the rite. It is true that people east of the Jordan were separated from the Tabernacle and perhaps were ignorant of the law on some points.<sup>5</sup>

The story as it has been observed, however, does not indicate that this was true of Jephthah, and, as noted earlier, even the people in general repented of their sin in greater sincerity than those west of the Jordan at any time. As for Jephthah himself, it has been seen that he was a surprisingly godly person, in spite of his unlikely background. And, further, in respect to Jephthah's daughter, she too was remarkable, both in her knowledge of the law and her willingness to keep it. And, if she was, it is not difficult to think that others were too. The Transjordanians may not have been as ignorant of the law or heathen-influenced as is sometimes thought.

**D. *Jephthah's action not divinely approved.*** It is pointed out further that nothing in the divine record shows that Jephthah's action was approved by God. This is true, at least in part, for there is direct indication only that Jephthah carried out the vow and that an annual celebration of it was instituted. In response, however, it may be observed that the same is true of many other actions in the Old Testament which clearly were divinely approved. It should be noted that no indication exists, either, that it was not divinely approved. In fact, the statement, "Who did with her according to his vow" (Judg. 11:39), coming as it does after the statements of both the father and daughter concerning the obligation to keep the vow, seems to imply that there was a divine approval.

**E. *The words of Jephthah's vow.*** The principal argument is found in the words of Jephthah's vow and then the concluding indication in the story that Jephthah "did with her according to" this vow. The crucial words of the vow are, "surely be the LORD'S" and "offer it up for a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:31). The question concerns what Jephthah really meant when he spoke these words. The answer is not easily discovered, but the reasoning under the following points seems to fit all the factors.

**1) A preliminary question.** A pertinent first question concerns Jephthah's possible thinking in speaking of a "burnt offering" in reference to whatever should meet him first. The only type of being that could be so offered was an animal, according to the law, and it had to be one suitable for this kind of an offering. Did Jephthah really think that such an animal would be the first to meet him? He must have realized that a more likely possibility would be a person, perhaps a servant or even more his own daughter, who could be expected to be looking for his return. Being a thinking man--as he seems to have been--he certainly had thought of this and therefore would have had in mind what his vow would mean should this last possibility (or, better, probability) come true.

One may not argue, either, that his apparent grief on seeing his daughter shows that he had not counted on this, for her appearance would only have made him realize that the most difficult of the vow payments that had passed through his mind would now have to be made. It would have been so much easier if the one greeting him had been an animal, or even a servant. That he had been willing to make the vow in the first place, then, when it might mean the giving up even of his daughter, demonstrated most pointedly the sincerity of his heart at the time. Accordingly, when this most drastic aspect proved to be the type of payment that he would have to make, he of course recognized that he would have to carry it out. He had intended this from the first, only hoping that it might turn out so that he would not have to.

**2) The meaning of Leviticus 27.** Jephthah's words in the vow make sense and are understandable in the light of Leviticus 27, with which he must have been familiar. The chapter is devoted to stating what should be done with any person or object that might be set apart for God in such a vow. Verses 1-8 concern persons, verses 9-13 animals, verses 14, 15 houses, and verses 16-25 land. All these items could

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<sup>5</sup> To what degree they were more ignorant, in this day of terrible spiritual declension, is difficult to say, however. No Israelite had excuse for ignorance, for God had placed Levites in assigned cities east of the Jordan as well as the west (see discussion, chap. 3, pp. 57-59).

be set apart for God by vow, but each only in its own particular manner. Regarding animals, for instance, if the one thus set apart was suitable to be sacrificed in death (being of the right kind and quality), then this was to be done, but if it was not suitable, then it was to be sold and the money given to the sanctuary. Or, if the one who vowed suddenly changed his mind and decided to retain the animal for himself, then he had to buy it back at a price one fifth higher than its true value. Regarding a house so vowed, it too became "holy unto the LORD," but it could not be sacrificed, of course. It became "holy" in the sense that it was given to the priests, who could either use it or sell it for money; or, again, if the one who vowed suddenly changed his mind, he could buy it back by paying a fifth more than its value.

The first eight verses of the chapter, which concern persons, are the most significant for our notice. When a person vowed himself, or someone else, to God, that person came to be "for the LORD" in the sense that an "estimation" or evaluation was placed upon him by the priest. This "estimation" varied according to whether the person was a man between the ages of twenty and sixty, a woman presumably of the same age bracket, or a man between five and twenty, etc., in a descending scale of valuation. The highest "estimation" was fifty shekels, and the amount decreased to where a man, who was too poor to pay any of the standard amounts, could be especially valued for paying whatever he could. The money in any case was to be given to the sanctuary. The idea behind this regulation is not difficult to recognize. A man, so devoting himself, could not become a sacrifice like an animal, because human sacrifice was not permitted; nor could he normally be used in service because the priests and Levites were assigned to do this; nor could he be sold like a house or an animal. The alternative was that he be valued in terms of money and then pay that amount to help in the Tabernacle service. One exception to this existed regarding a woman, in the light of Exodus 38:8 and 1 Samuel 2:22, as noted; namely, that she could be devoted for Tabernacle service since she was a woman and could do things there which women could do better than men.

**3) Significance of Leviticus 27 for Jephthah's thinking.** Applying these regulations to Jephthah's actions in our story, the following reconstruction of his thinking can be made. He wanted God's blessing in the battle facing him and was quite willing to make a major vow to help assure it. He would devote to God, in keeping with Leviticus 27, whatever should first meet him when he returned in triumph to his home. If this should prove to be an animal suitable for sacrifice, then it would indeed be sacrificed; if it should be one not suitable, then it would be sold. If it should be a human, then it would be redeemed for the appropriate, estimated price, or else, in the case of a woman such as his daughter, she would be devoted to the sanctuary for perpetual service.

In view of what Jephthah did do with his daughter--in not taking the easier route of redeeming her for money, which he might have done, but devoting her for service--it is apparent that he had consciously had this in mind when he made the vow. He evidently had been serious enough in the vow to choose deliberately for this course of action with his daughter, should she be the one who would meet him. One may say, then, that Jephthah had not only thought of the possibility that his daughter would be the one to meet him, but had actually decided what his course of action would be if this proved to be the case. The reason why he was distressed on seeing her--which no doubt he had fearfully expected all the while--was not that he had not thought about this possibility, but that he would now have to pay the high price in respect to her.

A further note is in order relative to the Hebrew verb and noun translated in the phrase of Jephthah's vow, "I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:31). Both verb and noun come from the one root, *'alah*, meaning "to go up." It is true that the combination of both in the Old Testament commonly means, "to offer a burnt offering." The words themselves, however, do not connote the idea of death. They speak only of something being given up to God. A literal translation of Jephthah's words, in fact, would be, "I will cause that which goes up to go up." This means that Jephthah chose to use an expression that could apply to any of the items mentioned in Leviticus 27. He would cause whatever first met him to "go up" to God in the manner set forth in that chapter. Indeed, in designating the item that he would so devote, as that which would meet him on his return home, he was really leaving the matter in God's hands of what

that item would be--which God, then, would want given up to Him in the way set forth in Leviticus 27.

As for the idea of perpetual virginity being involved with the sanctuary service of women, it is true that this never is directly indicted in the law. Admittedly, the one instance in the Old Testament where the matter is set forth clearly is this story of Jephthah's daughter. Two factors from the story, however, give convincing evidence that the idea was observed. The first is his daughter's action in bewailing her virginity for two months, prior to her being devoted for sanctuary service. Just as this action makes no sense on the basis of her being sacrificed in death, so it makes no sense if her life later at the Tabernacle was not to be celibate. The second is the indication given, immediately after the daughter was assigned to the service, that as a result "she knew no man." This is a direct indication that she began a life of perpetual virginity.

Besides this story, there is one other passage which may give evidence. This is the story of the "daughters of Shiloh" being captured as wives for the Benjamites (Judg. 21:19-23). That they were a unit group of "daughters" (as the story shows) and that they were significantly related to "Shiloh," where the Tabernacle was located, makes for the possibility--if not probability--that these young ladies were Tabernacle servants in the pattern intended for Jephthah's daughter. If they were, they give evidence that perpetual virginity was associated with this service because they came immediately to mind in the story as potential wives for the Benjamites, and the entire group as a unit was clearly in view. In other words, the thinking was that, if a young lady was of this group, she was thereby qualified as a potential wife because she was unmarried.