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Last week I asked a question about Jephthah. He seems to be more cognizant of God than Gideon. Did that make him a more mature believer than Gideon? The consensus of commentators, both liberal and conservative is that things are getting progressively worse in the book of Judges. So how could Jephthah be any better than any of the previous deliverers? Read portions of Judges chapter 11 as we did last week, but this time highlight those verses that could be taken as a spiritual orientation by Jephthah.

Lets look at the previous deliverers and try to characterize them in their relationships to God. Let see if we can understand what is going on in the book of Judges vis-a-vis Jephthah.

Othniel. He is a model of what a believer man should be. Previous to being a deliverer/judge, he and his wife are portrayed as model citizens. When God appoints him as a deliverer he does his job, accomplishing God's plan without much fanfare. A righteous man.

Ehud. He accomplished God's plan using a plan he devised. The issue that some have with Ehud is the way he executed king Eglon. Some thought of it as murder. But he is killing the enemy king. He cut off the head of the snake. Ehud is the planning, perhaps even conniving man, but in a good way, even if a bit messy. Because of his ruse to fool Eglon, he might be called the "ruse" man.

Barak. He was a weak man, indecisive and hesitant. Deborah was judging and a prophetess. Barak was more observer of God's plan than executor. Jael, another woman, took the glory of killing the enemy troop commander. Barak is the observing man.

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Gideon. He had no clue who God was and what to do. But he was teachable. Of all the deliverers up to this point, it would appear God expended the most energy on him. First God sent a prophet to explain to the people why they were in a bad situation. Then the Angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ, spent time with Gideon educating him in grace. Then he was endowed with the Holy Spirit. Then God had an enemy soldier have a dream interpreted just for Gideon. Then Gideon got to watch as God worked while he observed. Gideon was an ignorant teachable man.

Abimelech. He is not a deliverer nor a judge. He is more like evil incarnate. Perhaps a devil figure. Interesting how he died. He was “bruised” on his head. He is perhaps a contrast to both Gideon, the good guy, and Jephthah who had a poorer beginning than Abimelech. He is the evil man.

Jephthah. And now we get Jephthah who appears to be more cognizant of the “spiritual” than Gideon. And therein lies the problem. Is he really “spiritual” or is there something else going on?

1. He starts out as the son of a prostitute and then as an outcast from his father’s house and the Israelite community.
2. He is described by commentators as something of a criminal.
3. Then, because of becoming a “valiant warrior” as an outcast, the people of Gilead go to him, hat in hand, and offer to make him chief if he will lead the Israelites against the military forces of Ammon. From a human perspective, he has been officially redeemed. He is now a “righteous” man.
4. There is perhaps a clue of where we are going by the words used in verse 10, paraphrasing a bit, “As God is our witness.” When I hear that on TV, I am thinking, the speaker wants to convince the

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audience that he is righteous when he might not actually be 100% righteous. Let us call that “self-righteous.” They had not consulted with God. They are using the Lord’s name in vain.

5. Jephthah goes to Mizpah before the Lord.

Judges 11:11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah.

Mizpah. Means “watchtower.” The meaning comes out in the treaty between Laban and Jacob in Genesis. Let us read that to get a sense of what this really means, even if these two Mizpah’s are different locations. The meaning is the same. Read Genesis 31:43-55. The idea is what the people had said earlier, “As the Lord is witness.” So, this has become a solemn treaty between Jephthah and the elders of Gilead. Does this mean that Jephthah is worshiping the Lord here or just using Him as a “Notary Public?” After all, this is the righteous thing to do. In all this, did Yahweh answer or provide guidance? Or was this just the routine that the negotiations required?

6. He then attempts to negotiate with the king of Ammon through messengers arguing on the basis of law. He is claiming righteousness.

Let’s look at a couple of verses and then return to this train of thought.

Judges 11:12 Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying, “What is between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?”

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Jephthah sent messengers. Jephthah sends a message directly to the head of state, the king of Ammon. How could he do that? Because Jephthah had been made head of state (chief) of Gilead.

What is between you and me. This is a Hebrew idiom, literally, “What to me and to you.” Jesus uses this idiom in John chapter 2 after Mary asks Jesus to take care of the “wine problem” at the Cana wedding. There it has been translated into the Greek by John/the Holy Spirit:

John 2:4 And Jesus *said to her, “Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come.”

You have come to me to fight against my land. Here is a Hebrew two-word combination showing purpose. You have come to fight. He makes it personal and at the same time claims ownership of the land as chief, “to me...against my land.”

Rather than go immediately into battle, Jephthah tried to find a diplomatic solution through negotiation. At the end of Jephthah’s logical argument from history and legal precedent he declares in Judges 11:27

Judges 11:27 I therefore have not sinned against you, but you are doing me wrong by making war against me; may the Lord, the Judge, judge today between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon.”

I have not sinned against you. The translation brings out the theological flavor of Jephthah’s words. The word “sinned” is the familiar word, “miss the mark.” He is saying, “I have not lost my righteousness.”

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You are doing me wrong. The word for “wrong” is our word, “evil.” Again, another theologically charged word indicating that Jephthah has accused the king of Ammon of having lost his righteousness. He is speaking from a human viewpoint.

May the Lord, the Judge, judge. If we had not gotten the legal tenor of Jephthah’s message, now he says that the Lord (Yahweh) should judge. Previously, Jephthah brought in Yahweh as Israel’s God and Chemosh as Ammon’s god. The question becomes how does each stand before his own god. Jephthah demands judgment because he is righteous or so he says.

You might correctly observe that there are no words for righteousness appearing in the text. It is the elephant in the room. [From Merriam-Webster website on the meaning of “elephant in the room”: “an obvious major problem or issue that people avoid discussing or acknowledging”]

But Jephthah has not appealed directly to his God in this case. He is using a legal argument using human viewpoint to try to convince the king of Ammon that he, Jephthah is right. My God and your god are in agreement. I am just telling you what that agreement was.

7. When we get to chapter 12, when Jephthah makes his vow to God, he is showing us that he does not understand grace at all. He is making a deal with God. I will do this for you if only you will do this for me. He offers whoever comes out of his house when he is victorious as a “burnt offering.” He understands the terminology but not the significance. In this case, it became human sacrifice which is an abomination to God. It’s kind of like a Christian who tells God, if only you will make me successful in this big deal coming up at work, I will go to church continuously. Life is about trusting God and letting Him work through your life. It is not about what you do for God but about what you let God do in your life.

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So, I would have to say that Jephthah has become a self-righteous legalist, one of the most despised type of people to God. Don't believe me, look at what the Bible says.

Isaiah 64:6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. Literally “menstrual cloths” according to Thomas Constable. But that does not communicate well in contemporary culture. Without going into vulgar language, this is closer, in our culture, to “used toilet paper.” This is how God looks at our righteousness in comparison to His.

Why did the apostle Paul think of himself as the worst sinner ever? Because of self-righteousness. He was so determined to enforce the law as he saw it in his own eyes that he was killing, murdering Christians.

1 Timothy 1:15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Listen to what Jesus had to say to Paul on the Damascus road:

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Acts 9:4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

**Acts 9:5 And he said, “Who are You, Lord?”
And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,**

Why did Paul persecute the church of God? Because in his self-righteousness, he wanted to impose his view of the law upon converts from Judaism to Christianity.

So, to answer the question posed last week, the reason Jephthah was a downgrade from Gideon is his self-righteousness which prompted him to make a deal with God. “I will do for your if you do for me.” While Gideon was teachable, Jephthah was just “used toilet paper.” Jephthah had become a self-righteous man.

Judges 11:13 The king of the sons of Ammon said to the messengers of Jephthah, “Because Israel took away my land when they came up from Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok and the Jordan; therefore, return them peaceably now.”

The king of the sons of Ammon said. It might be possible to see this from a Hollywood movie. Messengers from “chief” Jephthah are escorted into the chamber of the king. Remember this was what happened between Ehud and king Eglon. Except in this case, the king’s guards are present and ready to protect their king. These are messengers from the enemy.

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The area demanded by the king of Ammon is outlined in red in the map below. He has used three rivers as the boundaries of the territory: Jabbok river, the Arnon River and the Jordan River. The fourth side of this “box” is Ammon itself. This includes territory that belongs to the tribes of Gad and Reuben.



Red Outlined Area Demanded by King of Ammon

From website ConformingtoJesus.com

Peaceably. This is a word from the root “shalom.” In other words, all you have to do is give back the land you claim to me and you will have peace in our day.

Judges 11:14 But Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the sons of Ammon,

Judges 11:15 and they said to him, “Thus says Jephthah, ‘Israel did not take away the land of Moab nor the land of the sons of Ammon.

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Judges 11:16 For when they came up from Egypt, and Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh,

Judges 11:17 then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, “Please let us pass through your land,” but the king of Edom would not listen. And they also sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh.

Judges 11:18 Then they went through the wilderness and around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and came to the east side of the land of Moab, and they camped beyond the Arnon; but they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab.

Judges 11:19 And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, “Please let us pass through your land to our place.”

Judges 11:20 But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people and camped in Jahaz and fought with Israel.

Let us read Numbers chapter 21 to get the full story from the Biblical account.

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Let us compare what Jephthah says against what the narrative in Numbers chapter 21 says for this verse:

Numbers 21:23 But Sihon would not permit Israel to pass through his border. So Sihon gathered all his people and went out against Israel in the wilderness, and came to Jahaz and fought against Israel.

Numbers says “permit” which is from the Hebrew word “to give.” But Jephthah says that the king of Sihon did not trust Israel. I find this very interesting that Jephthah uses a word for faith. Again, Jephthah is using words that have a theological component to them. Yet, that is the very thing that Jephthah, for the most part is lacking—faith in Yahweh.

Judges 11:21 The Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that country.

Judges 11:22 So they possessed all the territory of the Amorites, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and from the wilderness as far as the Jordan.

This is the very land that the king of the Ammonites wants “returned” to him. It wasn’t his land to begin with and hasn’t been since it was conquered after the king of Sihon “drew first blood.”

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Judges 11:23 Since now the Lord, the God of Israel, drove out the Amorites from before His people Israel, are you then to possess it?

Yahweh, the God of Israel is the one that gave this land to Israel.

Judges 11:24 Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the Lord our God has driven out before us, we will possess it.

Here Jephthah sets up a comparison between Yahweh, the God of Israel and Chemosh the god of the Amorites/Sihon.

Judges 11:25 Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive with Israel, or did he ever fight against them?

Read portions of the narrative of Balak and the involvement with Balaam.

Judges 11:26 While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time?

Why now? The sons of Ammon could have reconquered the land during the previous 300 years. But, they didn't. So that set precedent.

Judges 11:27 I therefore have not sinned against you, but you are doing me wrong by

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making war against me; may the Lord, the Judge, judge today between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon.’’

We covered the words of this verse earlier. But note the words that have theological slants: “I have not sinned against you,” and “You are doing me wrong (miss the mark).”

Judges 11:28 But the king of the sons of Ammon disregarded the message which Jephthah sent him.

They did this at their own peril.