

Judges Chapter 11 Part 4

Last week, we looked at the concept of a vow. Now let us look closer at Jephthah's vow, reviewing summary points from last week.

Judges 11:30 Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand,

Judges 11:31 then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

Here are some summary points. I don't claim that these are all-encompassing as far as vows are concerned, but they move us forward in our understanding of them.

1. Biblical vows are made to God.
2. Vows are voluntary.
3. Vows, once made, must be kept.
4. Vow offers should be specific.
5. Vows must be made in the context of God's plan. They are based upon promise or precedent.
6. I do not see vows such as are offered in the Old Testament as applying in the Christian Age.
7. Jephthah has not been conversing with God. Instead, he is trying to solve the problem from man's perspective. It appears that this was a bad

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vow. I would not say that the victory God gave Jephthah's was a response to his vow. It was God's plan all along to deliver Israel. God just needed a man who in a crisis would for a short period trust Him to deliver Israel. In spite of his shortcomings, Jephthah did trust God, even if for a short period as is evidenced by his name in the book of Hebrews chapter 11.

There are some nagging questions not addressed in the text. Some of these are obviously in need of discussion.

The first of these is the issue of the Mosaic Law and the Levitical priesthood. Leviticus chapter 1 provides details of the Burnt Offering.

Read Leviticus chapter 1. Note the following points:

1. The Levitical priesthood (Aaron's sons) are involved in the sacrifice.
2. Part of the description of the sacrificed animal not human being is that "he is to offer a male without defect." Not a female.
3. The person offering the sacrifice is to slaughter the animal "before the Lord." In the context of the book of Judges, this would have been the Tabernacle. There was no temple as yet.
4. "He is to skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces." Leviticus 1:6
5. Then the offering is burned in fire on the altar.
6. If applied to a human being instead of an animal, this becomes gruesome. If he was following the instructions, he slit his daughter's throat, skinned her, cut her in pieces and then burned the pieces in a fire. Preview of coming attractions: there will be another woman in the book of Judges who is cut into pieces. The point is Israel has become like the Canaanites, perhaps even more evil than they.

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As far as Jephthah's offering, there is no mention of the priesthood being involved. There is no mention of the tabernacle. I would guess that if Jephthah had brought his daughter to the priesthood at the tabernacle, that they would have been horrified at the thought of a human sacrifice.

What puzzles me is where did Jephthah come up with the idea of a burnt offering, not from the herd or flock, but from his own house? And if he is doing this without the involvement of the priesthood, is he reverting back, in his thinking, to pre-Mosaic Law. Jephthah, when negotiating with the king of Ammon seemed to know his history. But it is obvious he did not know his theology. So let me ask a question? Was there a patriarch who nearly sacrificed a human being from his household?

Yes. Abraham. But that was done at God's request. And God stopped the human sacrifice and substituted a ram. That was to illustrate substitution which was a type of Jesus Christ on the cross. Did Jephthah expect God to intervene like He did for Abraham? Jephthah may have known his history, but he did not know any theology.

But here in Judges, God was only involved in providing the Holy Spirit. That is another matter apart from the vow and its accomplishment. That will be a topic for next week. Was Jephthah thinking that God would stop him and provide a substitute? He knew his history but not his theology.

This is speculation on my part.

Judges 11:32 So Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand.

Jephthah crossed over. We have encountered "crossed over" previously. In this case, it is a prelude to the defeat of the king of Ammon.

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Judges 11:33 He struck them with a very great slaughter from Aroer to the entrance of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel.

Were subdued. The Hebrew word means “to be humbled.” They were subdued, but they were still a continuing threat until the time of David.

Judges 11:34 When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had no son or daughter.

Judges 11:35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot take it back.”

I cannot take it back. Remember one of our points on vows was that once made, there was no going back on your word. What you vowed to do had to be done.

I have given my word. Literally, “I have opened my mouth.” Remember a quote from Mark Twain, “It's better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than open it and remove all doubt.” Too bad for Jephthah that Mark Twain's quote wasn't available at that time. Neither was:

Proverbs 17:28 Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent.

Judges 11:36 So she said to him, “My father, you have given your word to the Lord; do to me as you have said, since the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.”

From the perspective of American society, no child would willingly agree to be sacrificed. Yet, that is what the text here suggests. Different culture.

Judges 11:37 She said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions.”

Judges 11:38 Then he said, “Go.” So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity.

Judges 11:39 At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel,

Judges 11:40 that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

I need to take you on a short excursion concerning whether Jephthah actually killed, dismembered and burned his daughter in a fire. There has been some debate. Robbie Dean did his Master's thesis on this very topic.

Robert L. Dean, "An Analysis of Jephthah's Vow"

The consensus early Jewish and Rabbinic interpretations was until the twelfth century "that Jephthah literally sacrificed his daughter."

"As with the early Jewish writers, there was only one Christian view offered concerning Jephthah's vow—Human sacrifice—until after the time of Kimchi [a 12th century Rabbi]. Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom all held to the literal sacrifice view."

"Three things were noted as significant in relation to the uttering of the vow: first, the relation of the Holy Spirit's work to the vow. The nature of the Holy Spirit's ministry in the Old Testament was examined, concluding that it was for administration and military ability in delivering the nation from its oppressors. Second, the form of the vow indicates that the phrase explains how the vow would be performed. Third, the word choice indicates that Jephthah not only foresaw a human being coming out to greet him, but that this one would be offered up as a burnt offering. On the weight of this evidence it was concluded that Jephthah's original intention was to perform a literal human sacrifice."

"The response of both Jephthah and his daughter to the fulfillment of the vow was observed. They both believed that the vow was unalterable and must be fulfilled 'since the lord has avenged you of your enemies.' Both

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of them expressed the idea that the vow must be fulfilled as it was vowed.”

“The daughter’s next response was viewed as unique and somewhat enigmatic. She asked for two months to go to the mountains to mourn her virginity. This was understood to mean that since she was soon to die as a virgin and childless, she wished to go to the mountains, a place of solitude, to grieve over her unfulfilled life. When she returned, the writer discreetly wrote, “Jephthah did to her as he had vowed.”

“He could have either sacrificed her or dedicated her to perpetual virginity in the service of YHWH. It was determined that both options were unique in ancient Near Eastern history. Overall, whatever Jephthah determined to do after his daughter’s return was a subjective decision on his part and based on no law or tradition. Therefore, it cannot be determined unequivocally that he did sacrifice his daughter. However, the evidence slightly favors that view.”

“The other view is clearly possible within the limits of our present knowledge and should not be rejected.”

Based upon the text, historically accepted interpretations and upon the context, it is likely that Jephthah indulged in human sacrifice. This is a violation of Mosaic Law.

Now, here is an extended quote from Thomas Constable on this subject.

“When Jephthah returned home from battle, "his one and only child," a "daughter," greeted him gleefully ("with tambourines and ... dancing"; v. 34). The writer's description of her recalls Miriam's joy and dancing after the Lord gave the Israelites victory over their Egyptian pursuers (Exod. 15:20). But her joy became Jephthah's sorrow ("Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low ... "; v. 35). He falsely blamed her for his sorrow (cf. 1 Kings 18:17-18). But he himself was responsible for it,

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because of his vow to God (vv. 30-31). "Given my word" is wordplay (vv. 35-36). Jephthah's name means "he opens," and "given my word" is literally "opened my mouth." Jephthah evidently believed that to go back on his vow to God would involve a denial of his integrity, his very name. He felt he would be denying everything he believed in and stood for."

"Jephthah believed he could not get out of his vow (v. 35). Unfortunately he did not know, or had forgotten, that God had made provision for His people to redeem things they had vowed to give Him. Leviticus 27:1-8 instructed the Israelites that if they vowed someone or something to God, and then wanted it back, they could pay a stated ransom price and buy it back (cf. Exod. 13:2, 13; Num. 18:15).¹ Had he obeyed the Word of God, he could have avoided sacrificing his daughter. With his vow he sought to secure his present (a victory in battle), but through it he ended up sacrificing his future (his daughter, his only child). Contrast the outcome of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). Abraham had secured "a hope and a future" (cf. Jeremiah in Jer. 29:11), whereas Jephthah lost both. This is yet another example in Judges of self-assertion leading to violence, in this case the abuse of a young woman."

"Why do the fortunes of women decline as the Book of Judges proceeds, beginning here? Following the execution of Jephthah's daughter, things got worse for women in Israel. A Levite's concubine was raped, killed, and dismembered (ch. 19), 400 young virgins from Jabesh-gilead were abducted (21:12), as were the young women of Shiloh (21:21). One of the primary indications of moral confusion and social chaos in any society is the abuse of women. In recording these instances of the abuse of women in Judges, the writer was revealing the state of confusion and chaos in Israel."

Another trend we will see is the infighting among tribes.

These trends will call out for God's intervention in the form of a king.