

Judges 11:29-40

John Nordin Nov. 2006, Rev. Nov. 2007

²⁹Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh {men-ash-sheh'}. He passed on to Mizpah {mits-peh} of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites.

This takes place in Transjordan.

Note the presence and absences of God in this text.

Gilead – East of the Jordan

Manasseh –

Ammon – East of the Jordan

Does he only gather two tribes? Further sign of decline? (Janzen)

Cf. the spirit of the Lord's effects in

- **Jud. 3:10-11** ¹⁰ The spirit of the LORD came upon [Othniel], and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the LORD gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.
- **Judges 6:34** But the spirit of the LORD took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.
- 10:6-16
- **Judges 14:6** The spirit of the LORD rushed on [Samson], and he tore the lion apart barehanded as one might tear apart a kid.

³⁰And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering."

v.30 – only time he speaks to God. God does not answer.j

Is this vow a reflection of faithfulness, or unfaithfulness? He has already been empowered with God's spirit.

Cf. other problematic vows. **Numbers 21:1-3** When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel and took some of them captive. ² Then Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." ³ The LORD listened to the voice of Israel, and handed over the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so the place was called Hormah.¹

11:31 καὶ ἔσται ὁ ἐκπορευόμενος ὄς ἐὰν ἐξέλθῃ ἀπὸ τῆς θύρας τοῦ οἴκου μου εἰς συνάντησίν μου ἐν τῷ ἐπιστρέφειν με ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἀπὸ υἰῶν Αμμων καὶ ἔσται τῷ κυρίῳ ἀνοίσω αὐτὸν ὀλοκαύτωμα

What would be expected to come out of his house? An animal? A slave? If an animal, would it be one unacceptable for sacrifice (e.g. a dog)? How could this have had any good ending?

God must do two things for him.

WTT 11:31

הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדְּלַתִּי בֵּיתִי
מִבְּנֵי עַמּוֹן וְהָיָה לַיהוָה וְהָיָה
לְקִרְבָּנִי בְּשׂוּבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם
וְהָעֲלִיתָהּ עֹלָה: פ

v.31 Translation of "victorious" (NRS, RSV) cf. KJV, LXE, NAS: "in peace", NIV, NJB: "in triumph", TNK: "on my safe return"

Human sacrifice is prohibited (Leviticus 18:21 You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them¹ to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. Lev. 20:2-5, 2 Kgs. 23:10, Jer. 32:35) when offered to Molech.

Deut 12:31 You must not do the same for the LORD your God, because every abhorrent thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

Deuteronomy 18:10 No one shall be found among you who

עֹלָה:

burnt offering, an offering completely burned on altar: oft. w. vb. he^clâ: he^clâ

‘ōlōt Gn 8²⁰, he^clā l^c‘ōlōt Gn 22²; = ‘ōlā kālīl 1S 7⁹; — 2. **animal** to be offered in burnt offering Lv 1⁴. (pg 273)

But see 1 Sam. 17:23: “offer up”

³²So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand.

³³He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer {ar-o-ayr'} to the neighborhood of Minnith {min-neeth'} , twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

³⁴Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her.

³⁵When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow."

³⁶She said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites."

³⁷And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and

makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer,

2 Kings 3:26-27 ²⁶When the king of Moab realized he was losing the battle, he and 700 swordsmen tried to break through and attack the king of Edom, but they failed. ²⁷So he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him up as a burnt sacrifice on the wall. There was an outburst of divine anger against Israel, so they broke off the attack and returned to their homeland.

Jephthah – is all this evidence that he is pagan in spirit, if not in the name of the god he worships?

“Isn’t it interesting that the vow has two parts.” (for what Jephthah will do) Two descriptions of one act, or two acts?

Ammonites – a people living in Transjordan, east and slightly north of Jerusalem.

Aroer – city on the northern bank of the Arnon river. East of the Dead Sea.

Gilead – a region east of, and bordering the Jordan, opposite of the Sea of Galilee.

Mizpah is in Ephraim, north of Jerusalem. (?)

Jephthah apparently has no companions; he returned alone.

Note the emphasis on being an only child.

She, apparently, comes out alone. This is also odd.

Note how he blames her.

Is Jephthah’s anguish real or phony? Is he grieving for himself or for her? Could he really have been surprised?

He defeated the Ammonites, but then behaves like one (in sacrificing). cf. McCann.

Note the indirect reference to the implications of the vow.

Why is the vow not annulled?

Why was a substitute not offered? Lev. 27:2-8 governs cases of dedication for temple service. Leviticus 27:2 "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If anyone makes a special vow to dedicate persons to the LORD by giving equivalent values..."

Why does the skilled negotiator Jephthah not attempt to bargain with God? Cf. 11:6-11, 14-22

How to read her? Sarcastic? Note how she uses “you”. or

wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I."

³⁸"Go," he said and sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains.

³⁹At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that ⁴⁰for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

noble – sacrificing for “father and country”? Cf. **Judges 8:21** ²¹ Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "You come and kill us; for as the man is, so is his strength." So Gideon proceeded to kill Zebah and Zalmunna; and he took the crescents that were on the necks of their camels.

Some approve of her. Matthew Henry: "That it well becomes children obediently and cheerfully to submit to their parents in the Lord, and particularly to comply with their pious resolutions for the honour of God and the keeping up of religion in their families, though they be harsh and severe... and Jephthah's daughter here, who, for the satisfying of her father's conscience, and for the honour of God and her country, yielded herself as one devoted

Some think she is complicit in her own oppression.

38 “bewailed her virginity”, cf. NIV “because I will never marry.” Less sex than child-bearing, being a woman.

What should he bewail? His entire line becomes extinct.

Does the text approve or disapprove of his actions?

Another indirect reference to the implications of the vow.

Was she killed or dedicated to service in the Temple (and stay a virgin)? (Numbers 6:2 Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite.)

Go out – to place where she lamented?

Why four days?

Matthew Henry: “Such a rare instance of one that preferred the public interest before life itself was never to be forgotten. Her sex forbade her to follow to the war, and so to expose her life in battle, in lieu of which she hazards it much more”

This festival is otherwise unknown (in Bible and archeology) but is reported by Josephus and Pseudo-Philo.

How read the women? What exactly were they lamenting? Was this a subtle pre-feminist protest.

Context

- What does the larger career of Jephthah affect how we should view this passage? (discarded by family, gathers a gang, warrior, probably polytheistic in beliefs)
- The motif of “decline” throughout the book of Judges? And if so, how should it affect our view of this text. Consider each cycle of problem/appeal/judge/victory/rest. Each gets worse than the last.
- Cf. the sacrifice of Isaac. (Gen. 21)
- Should this story be compared to Greek tragedy, generally or to the specific story in Iphigenia among the Taurians, by Euripides? Iphigenia: “You vowed to the light-bearing goddess [i.e. Artemis] that you would sacrifice the fairest thing the year brought forth.”
- Vows
 - **Genesis 28:20-22** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you."
 - Numbers 21:1-3

- **Numbers 30:2-15** When a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. ³ When a woman makes a vow to the LORD, or binds herself by a pledge, while within her father's house, in her youth, ⁴ and her father hears of her vow or her pledge by which she has bound herself, and says nothing to her; then all her vows shall stand, and any pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. ⁵ But if her father expresses disapproval to her at the time that he hears of it, no vow of hers, and no pledge by which she has bound herself, shall stand; and the LORD will forgive her, because her father had expressed to her his disapproval. ⁶ If she marries, while obligated by her vows or any thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she has bound herself, ⁷ and her husband hears of it and says nothing to her at the time that he hears, then her vows shall stand, and her pledges by which she has bound herself shall stand. ⁸ But if, at the time that her husband hears of it, he expresses disapproval to her, then he shall nullify the vow by which she was obligated, or the thoughtless utterance of her lips, by which she bound herself; and the LORD will forgive her. ⁹ (But every vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, by which she has bound herself, shall be binding upon her.) ¹⁰ And if she made a vow in her husband's house, or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, ¹¹ and her husband heard it and said nothing to her, and did not express disapproval to her, then all her vows shall stand, and any pledge by which she bound herself shall stand. ¹² But if her husband nullifies them at the time that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows, or concerning her pledge of herself, shall not stand. Her husband has nullified them, and the LORD will forgive her. ¹³ Any vow or any binding oath to deny herself, ¹ her husband may allow to stand, or her husband may nullify. ¹⁴ But if her husband says nothing to her from day to day, ¹ then he validates all her vows, or all her pledges, by which she is obligated; he has validated them, because he said nothing to her at the time that he heard of them. ¹⁵ But if he nullifies them some time after he has heard of them, then he shall bear her guilt.
- **1 Samuel 1:11** [Hannah] made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite¹ until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants,² and no razor shall touch his head."
- **2 Samuel 15:7-10** At the end of four¹ years Absalom said to the king, "Please let me go to Hebron and pay the vow that I have made to the LORD. ⁸ For your servant made a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram: If the LORD will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will worship the LORD in Hebron."¹ ⁹ The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he got up, and went to Hebron. ¹⁰ But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then shout: Absalom has become king at Hebron!"
- **Sirach 18:22-23** Let nothing hinder you from paying a vow promptly, and do not wait until death to be released from it. ²³ Before making a vow, prepare yourself; do not be like one who puts the Lord to the test.

Perspectives

- Point of view: The shift from reading this story as about Jephthah to seeing it as about the daughter.
- Choice of interpretative frame brought to the story
 - "Whatever God ordains is always right."
 - "The Bible cannot be oppressive."
 - "If it's in the Bible, the Bible must approve of it."
 - "Bible is defective book."
 - "Women are abused by patriarchy."

History of interpretation

- Not true to claim that only the feminists have protested this as an abuse.

Why is this in the Bible? (What it meant)

- To serve as a bad example.
- To reinforce that sacrifice in the manner of foreigners is bad.

What can it mean for us?

- To reinforce that people can turn away from God and God allows that.

- To consider the silence of God. (Why doesn't God stop this?)

Questions

- Is this episode evidence for the evil of patriarchy or is it evidence of a bad patriarch?
- Out of all the violence, why does the violence against her haunt us?
- How can this nameless daughter be re-framed: as the sacrifice that ended child sacrifice? As a prototype of Christ?

Final words: Ecclesiastes 5:1-6: ⁴When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it. ⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands?

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