

Judges 11:1-40

The Foolish Vow of Jephthah

See:

<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8584-jephthah>

<https://www.aish.com/atr/Jephthah-Sacrificing-Daughter.html>

Judges 11:1 - "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, and he was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah."

Jephthah was probably a descendent of Gilead, rather than his son. Gilead was the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, and gave his name to the transJordan territory where the half-tribe of Manasseh settled.

Abimelech had been the son of a Gentile concubine, but Jephthah was in an even lower class - son of a harlot who was probably a Gentile, according to Josephus. (The Targum however makes her an innkeeper like Rahab).

Jephthah can mean "he opens" (the womb) as if he were a first-born. But it could also be a shortened form of *Yiphtah-el* = "God will open"

He was a "mighty man of valor" - a fierce, brave warrior - although of low birth.

Judges 11:2 - "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."

In the same way, Ishmael and the sons of Keturah were sent away by Abraham, that they might not inherit along with Isaac (**Genesis 21:10.**, **Genesis 25:6**).

Jephthah according the story would be described as a "bastard" - someone of illegitimate birth. According to the Law, "A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD" (**Deuteronomy 23:2**).

The ultimate purpose of that law was to keep every family's lineage clear, since Messiah would have a distinct lineage. In the time of the judges, though, God has to work with what he's got. The whole nation had devolved spiritually, and all the people could be described as idolatrous, spiritually adulterous, and, as in a later time of history, "a seed of the adulterer and the whore" like Jephthah (**Isaiah 57:3**).

Judges 11:3 - "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."

Tob was on the border with Syria and the Ammonite territories. Much later (**2 Samuel**

10:6, 8) 12,000 men of Tob (*Ish-tob*) were hired by the children of Ammon to fight against David.

Jephthah became a bandit, a gang leader operating from an outlying district. But if his plundering raids were against opposing Gentile tribes like the Ammonites, his reputation among Israelites would have not suffered, and his successes spoke of his abilities as warrior.

Around him he gathered "vain" men = *rêq* - empty, worthless fellows. The word vain is from the same root as "*Raca*."

- **Matthew 5:22** - "whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council"

(The same word described Abimelech's hired thugs in **Judges 9:4**)

That vain men gathered about him (**Judges 11:3**) was an illustration of the proverb that a sterile date-palm associates with fruitless trees (B. K. 92b).

Josephus says he maintained these mercenary "swords for hire" at his own expense, and paid them wages.

Men who were disinherited or otherwise adrift from society and with no loyalties often coalesced in such raiding groups. David gathered such a group around himself too:

- **1 Samuel 22:3** - "And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men."

Some of these followers of David are further described as "wicked and worthless men" (**1 Samuel 30:22**). But a leader like David could give these men purpose and cohesion. A leader like Abimelech could take them further into self seeking and depravity. Jephthah stands somewhere between these two poles.

Judges 11:4 - "And it came to pass in process of time, that the children of Ammon made war against Israel."

This brings us back to where we left off at the end of **Judges 10**.

The Summoning of Jephthah

Judges 11:5 - "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."

Their desperation is on display here. It was completely unheard of to name a bastard as

your leader. Even in ancient Athens, only someone of legitimate birth from parents who were citizens would be qualified to even participate in government, let alone lead.

They wanted him to be only a "captain" = *qāṣîn* - a war leader, general. But Jephthah had bigger plans. He could sit out the war, considering how he had been treated. But if he led them, he had to be sure they would do good on their promise.

Judges 11:9 - "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?"

"head" = *rosh* - in this context it means chief ruler, even after the war is over.

Finally,

Judges 11:11 - "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."

Jephthah was now "head and captain" - both.

Message to the Ammonites -- Judges 11:12-28

When the king of Ammon complains that Israel stole their land, Jephthah repeats the history of Israel defeating the Canaanites (Amorites). Since the Ammonites had never in 300 years put forth any claim to the formerly Canaanite land between the Jabbok and the Arnon rivers, why do it now?

Since the Ammonites would certainly settle in any territory that their god Chemosh delivered over to them, so the Israelites should be able to possess land that Yahweh had given them.

Judges 11:25 - "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?"

i.e. Balak had fought against Israel out of pure hatred, not from any pretensions to claim their conquests from them.

But the king of Ammon ignored Jephthah's words.

Jephthah's Vow

Judges 11:29 - "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."

The Jewish translation has "a spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah." The Targum says it

was "the spirit of strength."

"was or came upon" - a weaker expression - is used here than the phrase applied to Gideon in **Judges 6:34**. There, the word *labesh* is used, meaning Gideon "put on" or was "clothed" in the Holy Spirit. Here it implies, as R. Tanchum says, only that Jephthah was endowed with the courage and military wisdom without which success would have been impossible.

Jephthah was referred to as a judge only at the end of his story:

- **Judges 12:7** - "And Jephthah judged Israel six years..."

But it was not recorded either that God called him as judge, or even that he called himself one.

The Vow

The sad state of both Israel and its judges is reflected in Jephthah's stupid vow.

Judges 11:30-31 - "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."

Sure enough, God granted Jephthah victory. He conquered 20 Ammonite cities with "a very great slaughter," and Ammon was subdued.

But when he returned home, the consequences of the vow were revealed.

Judges 11:34-35 - "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."

It's indicative of his poor character that he seems to blame his daughter for the result of his crazy vow.

Why could he not take back his vow? Because the Law had forbidden it:

- **Deuteronomy 23:21-23** - "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee. That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the LORD thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth."

No one is encouraged to make a vow. But if you do, the vow must be fulfilled.

- **Numbers 30:2** - "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth."

Then follows a long explanation of how a father or husband can disallow the vows of his wife or daughter. In fact, there is much more about how to disallow a vow than about how to make one.

- **Ecclesiastes 5:5** - "Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay."

(NET - It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it)

Jesus is emphatic:

- **Matthew 5:33-37** - "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord. But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'-- anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

James seems to include even our plans into this category of vows:

- **James 4:13-16** - "Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil."

James takes a hard line on vows, saying they lead to hypocrisy:

- **James 5:12** - "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation (*hypokrisis* = hypocrisy)."

He was probably insisting that believers not make deals with God. A child would never swear that if his father would protect him, he will do such and such. The faith of a child just assumes God's care and protection and doesn't even think in those terms.

The Kol Nidrei ceremony at Yom Kippur allowed Jews to nullify their vows.

The sages were often contradictory in their opinion about the nullification of vows. But there are frequent negative statements:

"Samuel said, even when one fulfills his vow, he is called wicked (B. T. Nedarim 22a, 77b) On what verse is that based? 'If you cease from making vows you will be free from sin' (**Deuteronomy 23:23**)

R. Nathan said, "One who vows is as though he built a high place (for idolatry) and he who fulfills it is as though he sacrifices on it (B. T. Nedarim 22a)

That is interesting, because many times our vows are driven by idolatry - "By God, I'm never gonna let THAT happen to me again!" - or like in 'Gone with the Wind' - "I'll never go hungry again!" Personal vendettas of retribution, vows to close ourselves off to others after a great personal loss, or to put up walls when we've been hurt by someone, etc. This all happens when we're worshipping in idol rather than God.

Even Gentiles were wary of vows and swearing:

"Take an oath required on two accounts; either to purge thyself from a foul crime charged with, or to save friends in danger, and deliver them out of it; but on account of money (or goods) swear not by any deity, no, not even if thou canst take an oath safely; for by some thou wilt be thought to be perjured, and by others to be covetous."
-- Isocrates, among the most influential Greek rhetoricians of his time, (436–338 BC), *Paraenes Demonic*. p. 10.

The rabbis classed Jephthah with the fools who do not distinguish between vows (Eccl. R. iv. 7); he was one of the three men (Ta'an. 4a), or according to other authorities one of the four men (Gen. R. lx. 3), who made imprudent vows, but he was the only one who had occasion to deplore his imprudence.

They insist that he could have had the high priest [who they identify as Phinehas] to nullify his vow. According to R. Johanan, Jephthah had merely to pay a certain sum to the sacred treasury of the Temple in order to be freed from the vow; according to R. Simeon ben Lakish, he was free even without such a payment (Gen. R. l.c.; comp. Lev. R. xxxvii. 3). In fact, if one promises to transgress any law of the Torah, his promise is not binding (Rashi to Numbers 30:2 quoting Sifri). But Jephthah was proud: "I, a judge of Israel, will not humiliate myself to my inferior." Neither was Phinehas, the high priest, willing to go to Jephthah. Both were punished: Jephthah died by an unnatural decaying of his body; fragments of flesh fell from his bones at intervals, and were buried where they fell, so that his body was distributed in many places (comp. Judges xii. 7, Hebr.). Phinehas was abandoned by the Holy Spirit (Gen. R. l.c.).

The Fate of Jephthah's Daughter

In the Targ. Yer. to **Judges 11:39** and the Midrash, it is taken for granted that Jephthah immolated his daughter on the altar as a burnt sacrifice, which is regarded as a criminal act.

According to Tan., Behuqqotai, 7, and Midrash Haggadah to Leviticus 27: 2, even when Jephthah made the vow God was irritated against him: "What will Jephthah do if an

unclean animal comes out to meet him?"

Later, when Jephthah was preparing to sacrifice his daughter, she inquired, "Is it written in the Torah that human beings should be brought as burnt offerings?" He replied, "My daughter, my vow was, 'whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house.'" She answered, "But Jacob, too, vowed that he would give to Yhwh the tenth part of all that Yhwh gave him (Gen. xxviii. 22); did he sacrifice any of his sons?" But Jephthah remained inflexible. His daughter then declared that she would go herself to the Sanhedrin to consult them about the vow, and for this purpose asked her father for a delay of two months (comp. Judges xi. 37). The Sanhedrin, however, could not absolve her father from the vow, for God made them forget the Law in order that Jephthah should be punished for having put to death 42,000 Ephraimites (later in Judges 12:6).

No Balm in Gilead?

Some sources claim Jeremiah later railed against Jephthah for not remedying the situation. "Is there no balm in Gilead, is there no doctor there? For why was not the healing of the daughter of My nation forthcoming?" (Jeremiah 8:22). Gilead was known for producing balm, a resin-like healing substance. The immediate context is Jeremiah's grief for the destruction of Jerusalem. He could be appealing to Elijah the prophet, who was from Gilead, and whose words were healing. But Gilead was also Jephthah's region. The Sages apply Jeremiah's verse to Jephthah, saying he was punished for not seeking out "balm" - a healing solution for his oath - and bringing about his daughter's healing or release from the vow.

[The moral quandary in Jephthah's story is similar to that in "Antigone," the play by Sophocles, in which Antigone, mindful of her duty to her brother, secretly crept out at night to bury him against her father's orders. She is caught and condemned to death. To avoid direct responsibility for her death, her father ordered that Antigone be sealed alive in a cave with food and water. Antigone appeals to a "higher law" than her father's decree.]

An Alternative Explanation

<https://www.equip.org/article/jephthahs-bloodless-sacrifice/>

It was certainly an age in which everyone in Israel "did that which was right in his own eyes" (**Judges 17:6, 21:25**)

But Jephthah is described as a hero of faith in **Hebrews 11:32**, where he is grouped along with Gideon, Barak, Samson and King David.

Jephthah seems to be very aware of Israelite history. He would have also known burnt offerings prescribed by the Law had to be male (**Leviticus 22:18-19**), and that they were not associated with vows of thanksgiving like the one he made.

According to some commentators, among whom were Kimchi and Levi b. Gershom,

Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter, but only kept her in seclusion. In other words, he had "dedicated her to the Lord" so she could not marry. This would explain why her companions "bewailed her virginity" and the statement that "she knew no man."

In fact Jephthah's daughter may have volunteered to come through the door first.

This interpretation says the term "*olah*," which translates "ascent" and usually means a burnt sacrifice, in this case meant to be dedicated to the Lord - an act that would also "ascend" to God as a sweet savor offering.

It's plain from **Leviticus 27:2-8** that if someone vows to dedicate a person, the person can be replaced with an estimation of shekels - 30 shekels for a female. If not "redeemed" with money, the person would be set apart for the Lord as "holy" and would do no work. In the case of a woman, she would not labor in childbearing and therefore would remain unmarried.

Jephthah's loss is consistently described in terms of heirs and legacy, as his daughter is his only child (**Judges 11:34-35**), rather than in terms of a loss of life. For ancient Jews, this would still be a disaster.

If his daughter had volunteered in her own mind to this vow of seclusion to honor her father's vow in hopes of defeating the Ammonites, then it is still a loss for both Jephthah and his daughter, but without involving the murder of a human being.

Finally, the word for "lament" = *tanah* - in **Judges 11:40** literally means "to rehearse, celebrate, or commemorate." The annual observation would be to honor and remember her sacrifice in relation to Jephthah's victory over Ammon, rather than to mourn her death.

This would still leave Jephthah's vow as a hasty and foolish one, although not as tragic as is assumed.

Jephthah's story is a powerful lesson to us to "vow not." Humility demands it. Joshua already said we "cannot serve the Lord."

And according to **Numbers 30**, a husband can absolve the vow of his wife. Christ the Bridegroom has done this for us, his Bride.

Any vow we make now will be as foolish as the one Jephthah made.