



QUESTION – Please explain the vow that Jephthah made to God, mentioned in Judges, Chapter 11.



Did he or didn't he offer his daughter in sacrifice?

That is the question which Bible students have been asking for generation – even for centuries, and for a great many it is a question to which no quite satisfactory answer has been found. Or, at any rate, no answer with which they are completely comfortable.

It is a pity that, whilst we recognize that Jephthah made a vow which was, it must be admitted, by any standard extremely rash, this is probably the only fact about him with which most Christians are familiar. I suggest, therefore, that, before judging him on this one episode in his life, it would be useful to look at Jephthah a little more closely, because this might help us to gain a clearer understanding of what actually occurred.

The Background.

Jephthah's story is found the book of Judges chapters 11 and 12, and reading chapter 11, the first fact that we discover is that this man did not have the best of starts in life. In fact, it seems clear that his early life was disadvantaged racially, social and spiritually.

1st. He was the son of Gilead, who according to the genealogy in 1st Chron. 7:14 was the son of Machir, and Machir himself was the son of Manasseh, the elder son of the great Joseph. In Egypt, with the approval of Pharaoh, Joseph married Asenath the daughter of Potiphera, the priest of the 'Temple to the Sun' in the city of On. Therefore there was a strain of Egyptian blood in his descendants. It is generally considered that the ancestor of the Egyptians and other tribes who settled in Africa was Ham, the youngest son of Noah, and this means that Jephthah was not of pure Semitic blood.

2nd. He was the son of a prostitute and consequently his illegitimacy also affected his social position. It meant that he had no legal rights in his father's family, and no claim to his father's property.

3rd. His father Gilead, however, had other sons by a wife whose name is not recorded, and there came a time when, because of Jephthah's origin, these sons declared that they had no intention of allowing their illegitimate half-brother to share in the family inheritance. Jephthah was obviously an innocent victim in this situation, yet, severe as this decision was, it was fully in accordance with Mosaic Law which declared that only sons born in wedlock had the right to inherit (Deut. 21:17). Therefore, when the sons of Gilead disowned Jephthah, their action had to be upheld by the Elders of the tribe, with the result that he was sent away.

Judges 11: 3 tells us that he '*fled from his brethren and dwelt in the land of Tob*', a district in Syria, from where it is thought his mother originated, and where, also, in the course of time, he gained a somewhat questionable reputation as '*a mighty man of valour*' who had gathered about him a small army of men described unflatteringly as '*vain*'. This Hebrew adjective '*req*', means '*empty*', and two chapters earlier, it is the word used to describe the kind of men who had been hired by Abimelech. They are said to have been '*vain and light persons*'.

How Jephthah and his men survived in the territory of the Syrians, and how he acquired his 'strong man' reputation, we are not told. But this does not appear to have worried the Elders of the tribe of Gilead back in Palestine because, when faced with a desperate situation, it did not deter them from sending for him and inviting him to become the 'Captain' of their forces. At first, not surprisingly, Jephthah's response was not enthusiastic. He reminded them of the humiliating manner in which they had treated him. (ch.11:7) But when they made him the proverbial 'offer he could not refuse' (v.8), he became Chief of the tribe of Gilead, and led the

army against the invading Ammonites.

The Vow.

It was at this time that he made the vow for which he will always be remembered. (v. 30) Now, there is nothing unusual in the fact that he made a vow to God before going into battle, because this was a common practice among the ancient tribes of O.T. times, and, indeed, it has survived to our own days! What makes Jephthah's vow unusual is the promise he made to God, in return for giving him victory in battle.

What *did* he vow? Notice the emphatic word in verse 31. In the A.V. the word is '*whatsoever*', but modern versions, including the R.S.V. which I have before me as I write, gives us '*whoever*'; and this is the certainly the more accurate rendering. In fact, it is the word used in the Hebrew text and in both the Septuagint and the Vulgate versions of the passage. Jephthah promised that, "*Whoever comes out of the doors of my house shall surely be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering*".

But what did he have in mind – always assuming he was thinking logically! Do you really think that on his return from battle, he was expecting a *lamb or goat, or some other sacrificial animal* to come out of his house to meet him? Suppose some *unclean animal* – say, a dog, had run out, and was the first to meet its master, would he have felt obligated to fulfil his vow? If you say he was not expecting an animal to emerge from his house you are doubtlessly right! We must face the fact that he was promising to offer a human sacrifice.

But, what sort of man was Jephthah?

1. Was he an ignorant man, who did not know God's Law?
2. Was he a bad man who knew the Law and went ahead anyway?
3. Was he a good man, who realized he had made a mistake and had the courage to draw back from offending God?

These are just a few of the questions that arise when we try to reach a reasonable conclusion.

A Vow made in Ignorance?

Now, some commentators suggest that, if we consider that he was of '*semi-heathen parentage*' because his mother was an Aramean (Syrian), it should not altogether surprise us that Jephthah made such a vow. They tell us that, having lived among the Syrians for a number of years, he would be fully aware that such a practice was common among the Canaanite tribes, And they also point out that, as Gen.22 records, even Abraham had been prepared to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering, when his faith was put to the test by God Himself.

Again, when the King of Moab, desperate in the face of imminent defeat, sacrificed his own son, his action produced a wave of anger (2nd Kings 3:27). And even later, Manasseh, the evil King of Judah, sacrificed his son to the idol Moloch, a fact that again the scriptures record with obvious revulsion (2nd Kings 21; 6).

Was it carried out?

What we really want to know is was this rash vow actually carried out, or was it retracted and replaced by some other course of action? And it is here that opinions differ.

There are many, including great and good men of past centuries, who believe that, as appalling as it is to us, the daughter of Jephthah actually paid with her life for her father's rashness. Some have expressed the view that Jephthah was actually expecting to sacrifice a *slave* and was shocked when the first person to greet him on his return was his only daughter, but, they say, having vowed, he felt he could not go back on his vow. Incidentally, would it have been any *less* appalling if it had, indeed, been '*merely a slave*' who first came out of the house, and was sacrificed as a consequence?

But, there are several issues that we need to consider.

- 1) **There is the fact that God had neither commanded nor desired the making of such a vow as this.** Furthermore, nowhere in the scriptures do we find any recurrence of it. If the exceptional case of Abraham and his son Isaac is quoted, we should understand that the test was set by God, not to prove *to God* the strength of Abraham's faith, because God already knew both Abraham's strengths and weaknesses. The test was designed to reveal the strength of his faith *to Abraham himself*, and because God knew beforehand what the outcome would be, the life of Isaac was never really in danger.
- 2) **Human sacrifices were clearly and emphatically forbidden by the Law of Moses.** (Lev.18:21; Jer.7:31; Ezek.16:21 etc.,) because the practice was an identifying mark of idolatry and was the reason why the inhabitants of Canaan were driven out and the land given to the Israelites (Deut. 12:30-31).

The prohibition of the shedding of blood, first set out in Gen. 9:6, is also frequently repeated in the O.T. scriptures, and the sacredness of blood is made abundantly clear in the Law. If the Elders, the religious leaders of Gilead, had allowed Jephthah to carry through his rash pledge, not only would they have been guilty of descending to the level of their cruel pagan neighbours, they would, in fact, have shared Jephthah's guilt for the sin of deliberate disobedience of the Mosaic Law.

Some have argued that Jephthah was perhaps ignorant of the law of God relating to human sacrifice, but I suggest that this is inconceivable. We cannot believe that the Elders of His people did not know the Law, and they may even have advised him that adherence to the Law of God should always take precedence over any rashly made vow.

- 3) **"Obedience is better than sacrifice".** This was God's message to King Saul, brought by the prophet Samuel (1st Sam.15:22). Jephthah was faced with a choice between abandoning his vow, or persisting in offering to God a sacrifice which He had expressly forbidden, and which, we may be absolutely sure, was not acceptable to Him.

It is true the Hebrews regarded failure to keep a vow as an extremely serious matter, especially a vow made to God. But it would be better for Jephthah to abandon a vow he ought never to have made, rather than to violate the sacred Law of God.

- 4) **But was Jephthah ignorant of God's law?** It has also been argued by some writers that he was. But, when we read the message he sent to the King of the Ammonites, recorded in ch.11. 15-27, we find that he shows an impressively detailed knowledge of Israel's history and a clear understanding of God's dealings with His people during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Indeed, he must have known about the Covenant made at Sinai, and the Laws delivered to Israel through Moses.
- 5) **Was Jephthah an upright man?** At the other end of the spectrum, there are biblical scholars who claim that Jephthah was '*not a freebooter,*' that is, not a man who lived by plundering other tribes, but a man of high principles and a true worshipper of God. We must accept this assessment. After all, his name appears in Hebrews 11; 32, as one of those honoured by God because they lived 'by faith'. The question then arises; would a true worshipper of God, *deliberately disobey* the revealed will and law of God, and commit an act which God would regard as repulsive? I believe that he would not. Recognizing the course of action to what his rash vow committed him, he would seek an honourable release from it.
- 6) **Was there any solution?** Numbers 30:16 reveals that vows were not always irrevocable, and Leviticus chapter 27 contains divinely revealed instruction concerning the redemption of what are described as '*votive offerings*'. Now, the word '*votive*' means '*that which is dedicated in fulfilment of a vow*', and in this chapter it relates particularly to whatever was promised in vows to God.

The chapter explains that there were four different types of votive offerings (vows) that could be redeemed. They were vows that involved human beings, animals, house and lands. For instance, a man might have vowed to dedicate to God, either himself, or a member of his family, or possibly a slave. But the passage tells us that it was possible to *redeem* the person – or thing – that had been so dedicated, by handing over a prescribed amount of money to the priest. This law means that Jephthah's daughter could be redeemed and need not die.

If it is thought that the last few verses of the chapter say something different that is not the case, because those verses deal with a quite different situation.

a) The first part of the chapter 27 deals with the 'vow' - '*neder*,' such as Jephthah made. The word '*nadar*' means '*to make a vow*' and describes Jephthah's action - it is what Jephthah did!

b) The verses from v.28 lay down the law relating to things that were '*devoted*,' and here we have a different word, the word '*cherem*'. '*Cherem*' identifies any object or person that could *not be redeemed*, but which must be destroyed. Not destroyed because of a decision made by man, but because of God's command.

These last few verses explain why this was the case. There were two classes of people and things that could never be '*redeemed*, either:-

- i) Because God had already issued an explicit command with regards to what must be done with them, or:-
- ii) Because they had been claimed by Him, and therefore they already belonged to Him, and one can never '*buy back*' from God that which He declares is already His!

Think, in this connection, about His command concerning the destruction of Jericho; or His instruction to King Saul concerning the destruction of the evil King Agag and the Amalekites. All were '*cherem*' - under the ban – and could not be spared.

Conclusion.

Jephthah was clearly appalled when he realized that his rash vow had jeopardized the life of his only daughter, his *only* child, and when he contemplated the horror of what he had planned to do. The conversation that he had with her, shows that he was well aware of what the Law said concerning vows, and it is my personal view that he availed himself of the opportunity presented by the Law, to be released from his vow.

The outcome was that his daughter was not made a burnt-offering; instead her father surrendered her to the service of God, in which state she remained unmarried. We are told that he had vowed that, whoever came out to meet him '*should be YHVH's*. That is, *belong to God*. And his daughter was the first to greet him. He kept his promise. She was dedicated to the service of God, and remained unmarried for the rest of her life.

Her father was denied the companionship of his only child, and her dedication to God's service in this manner meant the end of his hopes of grandchildren. She was denied a husband, and there would be no-one to carry on the family name, which was one of the greatest sorrows that could be inflicted on a Hebrew. But although it was she who paid the heaviest price for her father's rashness, at least she remained alive.

If there is one simple lesson we should take from this strange story, it is that we should always be careful what we promise, and never be afraid to retract a promise that should never have been made in the first place.

**Frank Worgan, 11, Stanier Rd, Corby, Northants NN17 1XP.
Email:<Frank@fworgan0.wanadoo.co.uk>**