

Jephthah's Daughter

Unlike the popular [Abraham and Isaac](#) in which an angel of God released Abraham from sacrificing his son, the story of Jephthah's daughter is left to be forgotten. The events surrounding Jephthah can be found in Judges 10:6-12:7. The story of his daughter's sacrifice is covered in Judges 11:29-40.

Jephthah was one of Israel's judges who made a vow to God in exchange for a victory against the Ammonites. He would sacrifice, as a burnt offering, the first person who came out his house to greet him on his return. As fate would have it, it turned out to be his only child, his virgin daughter. He kept his vow.

To deflect comparison against Abraham and Isaac, this story is usually dismissed as a folk tale or a case of bad judgment. To those who take the Bible seriously, it can be neither-this is God's book. Jephthah made a deal with God. God kept his part of the bargain and he didn't release Jephthah from keeping his part for reasons that will be explained in the commentary section.

Jephthah vowed to God that if he is given victory over the Ammonites, he will make a burnt offering with whoever comes out to greet him when he returns victorious.

²⁹Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites.

³⁰And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If thou wilt give the Ammonites into my hand,

³¹then whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering." (Judges 11:29-31)

So God gave him the Ammonites and twenty more cities.

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

³³And he smote them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a very great slaughter. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. (Judges 11:32-33)

When he came home, his daughter came out to meet him. She was his only child.

³⁴Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. (Judges 11:34)

He was shocked because he could not take back his vow.

³⁵And when he saw her, he rent his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! you have brought me very low, and 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." (Judges 11:35)

Who did he expect? A stranger?

She understood his dilemma and promised to cooperate. Jephthah honored her one final request for two months leave so she may bewail her virginity.

³⁶And she said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone forth from your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites."

³⁷And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go and wander

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

³⁸And he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. (Judges 11:36-38)

She returned after two months and Jephthah kept his vow.

³⁹And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had made. She had never known a man. And it became a custom in Israel

⁴⁰that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year. (Judges 11:34-40)

Commentary

1. This is no folk tale. The last verse, 11:40, calls it a yearly four-day holiday. Obviously, it was once taken seriously.

2. Since his daughter was his only child, Jephthah must have been hoping some other family member would come out to greet him. Who could it be? His wife? His mother-in-law? We don't know. But the bottom line is that Jephthah was willing to sacrifice a family member in exchange for victory.

3. And what of God? No angel came down to stop the burnt offering like in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God delivered and Jephthah had to keep his vow. Deuteronomy tells us that vows must be paid for.

²¹"When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not be slack to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin in you.

²²But if you refrain from vowing, it shall be no sin in you.

²³You shall be careful to perform what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth. (Deut. 23:21-23)

4. Another difference between Abraham and Isaac: Abraham's son was a male virgin; Jephthah's daughter was a female virgin. God seems to prefer virgin girls.

5. The Ammonites were major adversaries. Before Jephthah's victory, God was punishing the Israelites for worshipping idols. The Ammonites were oppressing them for eighteen years until Jephthah defeated them. We can be fairly certain that the price of redemption for lifting the curse had to be someone clean and pure—a virgin girl.

⁷And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites,

⁸and they crushed and oppressed the children of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel that were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. (Judges 10:7-8)

6. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. His father's wife disinherited him from any family property. This does not seem to have any relevance to his career.

¹Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. Gilead was the father of Jephthah.

²And Gilead's wife also bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they thrust Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall not inherit in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman." (Judges 11:1-2)

Except according to Mosaic Law, he should not have been a Judge because he was a bastard.

²"No bastard shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD. (Deut. 23:2)

7. According to Mosaic Law, a vow once made must be kept no matter what the consequences.

²¹When 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.

²²But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.

²³That 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. (Deut. 23:21-23)

8. In the final analyses, Jephthah was chosen by God to fight Israel's enemies. An impious man would not have taken such a vow. He had every reason to believe that God kept his part of the vow BECAUSE it was embedded in his culture. Whether or not he would have won anyway, or if he made a mistake would be second guessing. He had to keep his vow as a sign of faith. For all he knew, there would have been worse consequences if he reneged. Maybe God was testing him. Especially, this story tells us that child sacrifice in the name of Yahweh was once a part of Hebrew culture. Excuses that Jephthah was irresponsible don't hold up.

Excuses, excuses

Let's examine some of the usual excuses given for why Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter.

Excuse 1: The chapter doesn't explicitly say God influenced Jephthah in any way.

Retort: If the sacrifice was Jephthah's idea alone, leaving God two bad choices, God did not register an objection nor channel him into a different vow. More so, not only did God accommodate Jephthah's request for victory over the Ammonites, he gave him victory over twenty more cities! How could Jephthah NOT take that as an endorsement?

And finally, if God did not know Jephthah's daughter would be first to greet him, then God has no prescience. On grounds of prescience, we could reasonably argue that knowing it would be Jephthah's beloved daughter and only child, God gave him twenty more cities as compensation! The story ends here, so we do not know if Jephthah had more children later, perhaps even a son.

Excuse 2: According to Leviticus 22: 18-19, burnt offerings have to be male.

¹⁷And the LORD said to Moses,

¹⁸"Say to Aaron and his sons and all the people of Israel, When any one of the house of Israel or of the sojourners in Israel presents his offering, whether in payment of a vow or as a freewill offering which is offered to the LORD as a burnt offering,

¹⁹to be accepted you shall offer a male without blemish, of the bulls or the sheep or the goats. (Lev. 22: 17-19)

Retort: The Leviticus passage assumes a freewill offering of an animal. A freewill offering under Deuteronomy 23:21-23 makes no exceptions.

²¹When 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.

²²But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.

²³That 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. (Deut. 23:21-23)

Excuse 3: According to Deuteronomy 12:31, human sacrifice was strictly forbidden by law.

³¹You shall not do so to the LORD your God; for every abominable thing which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. (Deut. 12:31)

Retort: Despite protestations to the contrary, the leaders and people of ancient Israel practiced human sacrifice at various times. See [Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel](#).

[The Book of Judges](#) emphasized the problems that precipitated the need for prophets and kings. As we see in 1 Samuel, some Judges were corrupt as Samuel's sons were.

¹When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel.

²The name of his first-born son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba.

³Yet his sons did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice. (1 Sam. 1:1-3)

This motivated the elders to plead with Samuel for a king. When Samuel prayed to God, God complained that they had forsaken him to serve other gods.

⁷And the LORD said to Samuel, "Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

⁸According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you.

(2 Sam. 1: 7-8)

We have it on the highest authority that Judges were far from perfect. To argue that Jephthah would not sacrifice his daughter misses that salient point.