

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

UNDERSTANDING JEPHTHAH'S VOW STORY:

A STUDY OF A CONFLICTED CHARACTER

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The story of Jephthah and his tragic vow in chapter 11 of the Book of Judges has raised many questions in the audience throughout history in a quest to understand how a Yahweh-worshipping leader and appointed deliverer of Israel can make and keep a vow that leads to the sacrifice his one and only daughter. According to one scholar, the story constitutes one of the “texts of terror” in the Bible alongside such accounts as Abraham’s expulsion of Hagar, Amnon’s rape of Tamar, and the gang rape at Gibeah.¹ While Jephthah’s act is considered by many to be appalling, it has also been venerated by some as an act of faith; an illustration of him as a saint next to Abraham serves as an example.² Further perplexing the reader and creating a wide spectrum of response is the fact that the narrator neither evaluates Jephthah’s act, reveals his internal thoughts, nor includes God’s judgment in the story.³ Rather, the narrator reports in a neutral tone as if to allow the reader to engage and to discover what may not be immediately apparent in such a confronting story. Using a historical and literary approach to draw clues from the text in Judges 11 about Jephthah’s life setting and character, this paper attempts to demonstrate how the tragedy of Jephthah’s vow-making and keeping is not unfounded but rather rooted in his conflicted inner person, which may represent the greater conflict between the waywardness of God’s people and the persistent faithfulness of God during the period of judges in the Israelite history.

Establishing a foremost understanding of the historical context of the Book of Judges in which the story of Jephthah is found provides helpful information for approaching the story. The

¹ James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 407. Kugel explains the phrase quoted from a feminist scholar Phyllis Trible.

² Bernard P. Robinson, “The Story of Jephthah and His Daughter: Then and Now,” *Biblica* 85, no. 3 (2004): 331, 345, 346, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001446296&site=eds-live>. 331, 345, 346. Robinson provides examples of how Jephthah’s vow story has been wrestled with, famously by St. Augustine and Sir Thomas Browne, while also perceived and presented favorably through writings and illustrations like the depiction of “St. Jephthah” in a vow scene with his daughter at St Catherine’s monastery on Sinai.

³ Peter F. Lockwood, “Jephthah’s Daughter: Awake to Her Wicked Father (Judges 11:29-40),” *Word & World* 40, no. 3 (Sum 2020): 211, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLAIiREM200930000403&site=eds-live>.

narrator describes this period after Joshua in the Israelite history as one when “there was no king in Israel,” and “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25 ESV). This mode of self-centered living has led people to turn away from Yahweh, worship the gods of the surrounding nations, and do “evil in the eyes of the Lord” time and time again (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). In wrath, God judges and hands His people over to their enemies who oppress them for a period of time. When the Israelites finally cry out for His mercy and seek forgiveness, God raises a judge, or a deliverer, to fight against the enemies and to rescue and protect the people of Israel once again. The main role of these judges was mostly military in nature, and winning battles was crucial for preserving God’s people in the midst of syncretic influences and powerful foreign arms. The Spirit of God as seen in the Book of Judges empowers the judges to successfully carry out their role so that God’s covenant with His people can continue. In Exodus 6:7, God through His servant Moses proclaims His covenant with the Israelites that they would be His people and that He would be their God. Despite the fact the people were often unfaithful and betrayed their covenantal identity, the Book of Judges demonstrates the long-suffering faithfulness of God who still defended His people in times of crises by raising up judges, however flawed they may have been themselves, just like the rest of Israel.

Judges 11 introduces a Gileadite man named Jephthah, the eighth of the 12 judges mentioned in the book. In verses 1-3, the narrator establishes significant details about Jephthah’s upbringing:

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.” Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.

He is described as both a “mighty warrior” and a “son of a prostitute” (11:1). The recognition of his military prowess is presented in tension with his rather disgraceful birth and disjointed relations with family that considers him unworthy. Jephthah flees and settles in a place named Tob, the meaning of which plays an interesting function in the Jephthah narrative according to Lockwood:

Bearing deep-seated resentment against his people for disinheriting him and banishing him from home, Jephthah quickly gathers around him a band of “outlaws” (literally, “empty men”) who have likewise outstayed their welcome in polite society. This indicates the company that Jephthah likes to keep. The ironic name of the region they inhabit, Tob (v. 3), Hebrew for “good,” also gives advance notice that the vow story may well contain words whose meaning should not necessarily be taken at face value.⁴

As Lockwood suggests, Jephthah’s story contains more literary clues that provide an insight into his character and set the stage for his eventual vow, which, albeit shocking, has a traceable root in his life formation.

The description of Jephthah’s disjointed family history in these beginning verses are significant because it illuminates his vulnerable inner person beneath the outer identity as a valiant warrior, and demonstrates a theme of “family failure” throughout the Book of Judges that continues into Jephthah’s own family and fatally affects his own daughter.⁵ His experience of being rejected and abandoned by his family, only to be desired back for what he can do for them when they are in trouble, may point to the core values that develop as motivations for Jephthah: approval from others, performance-based acceptance, vindication, and security. Seemingly ingrained in Jephthah as his *modus operandi* throughout his story, these values eventually give context to his tragic vow in which Jephthah, a deliverer of a nation, simultaneously becomes a destroyer of his own family.

⁴ Lockwood, “Jephthah’s Daughter,” 212.

⁵ Michael J. Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges Part 1 Jephthah,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, no. 647 (July 2005): 279–98, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001466301&site=eds-live>.

As the Ammonites declare war on the Israelites, Jephthah's half brothers and the other Gileadite elders seek him out in Tob and invite him to "come and be [their] leader, that [they] may fight against the Ammonites" (11:6). As bitter as it may be, the call from his brothers to "go with [them] and fight with the Ammonites, and become head over [them], over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (11:8) is to Jephthah an incomparable opportunity to finally earn the approval and acceptance which he has always wanted. He responds to them in verse 9, "If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head." Jephthah is set on redeeming his worth and position before his real enemies--not the Ammonites but his half brothers and the other Gileadite elders.⁶

For such an opportunity as this, securing victory against the Ammonites is important to Jephthah for his personal agenda as well as for God's agenda of delivering the Israelites through him, and verse 29 reports that the "Spirit of the Lord [is] upon Jephthah." Martin explains that "the Spirit of Yahweh in Judges functions primarily as the dynamic presence of Yahweh that compels and empowers the judges to effectuate Yahweh's salvation of his covenant people."⁷ Therefore, the Spirit of God's being upon Jephthah signifies that Jephthah would be victorious in battle and successfully deliver the Israelites by the mighty arm of God at work in him.

Despite being endowed with the Spirit of God, Jephthah independently makes a vow back to God as if to attempt to further secure his success: "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (11:30-31). It is important to note that while the vow initially appears pious and committed, it is a vow that Jephthah makes on his own and is not something sanctioned by God nor inspired by the earlier

⁶ Lockwood, "Awake to Her Wicked Father," 217.

⁷ Lee Roy Martin, "Power to Save!?: The Role of the Spirit of the Lord in the Book of Judges," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 16, no. 2 (April 2008): 21, doi:10.1163/174552508X294189.

coming upon of the Spirit of God. Chisholm notes that "when one surveys the evidence in the Book of Judges, it becomes apparent that the Spirit empowered recipients for physical conflict, but possession of the Spirit did not insulate the recipient from foolish behavior."⁸ Furthermore, the literary positioning of Jephthah's vow in verses 30 and 31 appears to interrupt an otherwise dovetailing pair of verse 29 ("disjunctive clause" about the Spirit's coming upon) and verse 32 ("resumptive clause" about Jephthah's victory).⁹ Based on this observation, Chisholm suggests that "while the victory is *causally* related to Jephthah's endowment with the Spirit it is only *incidentally* related to the vow."¹⁰

Unprompted by the Spirit of God but motivated by his own desire for foolproof victory, Jephthah declares an ostentatious vow before God that is ironically contrary to God's command. In the vow, the Hebrew word for "whatever" (11:30) can also be translated "whoever," indicating that the prospective sacrifice of burnt offering can be a human being. By the words of his own mouth, Jephthah proactively allows for the possibility of human sacrifice. In addition, it was customary in the ancient days "for women to welcome the return of a victorious hero. (Miriam plays a timbrel and dances after the victory at the Sea of Reeds [Ex. 15:20])."¹¹ As an accomplished warrior himself, Jephthah must have been familiar with the custom and at least expected the possibility that a woman in his household, whether a wife, slave, or daughter may "[come] out to meet him with tambourines and with dances" (11:34), which is tragically what happens indeed with his daughter. Even if Jephthah has failed to calculate his risks at the moment when he rashly utters the vow, he cannot escape the fact that Yahweh has

⁸ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr, "The Ethical Challenge of Jephthah's Fulfilled Vow," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167, no. 668 (October 2010): 411, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001802887&site=eds-live>.

⁹ Chisholm, "The Ethical Challenge," 411.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Moshe Reiss, "Jephthah's Daughter," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (January 2009): 57, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=36046997&site=eds-live>.

unquestionably denounced child sacrifice and forbidden His people from following the practice of the surrounding nations in worship of their gods (Deut. 12:31; 18:10; Lev. 20:1-5; Ezek. 20). Therefore, in the mere making of the vow, Jephthah jeopardizes his own family, violates the command of God and ironically reflects the values of his surrounding nations, especially the Ammonites who are supposed to be his enemies in battle.¹²

Jephthah's vow with its horrific implications reflects the culture and values of other nations and gods more than of Yahweh, while feigning an unmatched zeal and piety to Him. For example, the efficacy of child sacrifice seems to have been considered by Jephthah even at the cost of compromising his worship to God. There is an account of the King of Moab who sacrifices his first-born son in the city gate during battle, the effect of which makes the Israelites retreat (2 Kings 3:27). Perhaps in making the vow, Jephthah is not only aware of but also eagerly expectant of a similarly favorable outcome, however evil the method is in the eyes of God.¹³

It is one thing to make a vow, but wholly another to fulfill it. As soon as Jephthah sees that his one and only daughter is the first one to greet him, verse 35 reads, "he tore 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.'" As dramatic as his display of grief is his projection of blame on his daughter for his self-imposed commitment to keep the vow before God. His apparent grief seems to be a reference to Deuteronomy 23:21-23: "If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you

¹² Smith, "Failure of Family," 292. Smith argues, "Certainly Jephthah knew that human sacrifice was forbidden in Israel (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31), and "yet Israel's neighbors—ironically, especially the Ammonites—sacrificed their children and this custom might have influenced Jephthah."

¹³ The story of the Moabite King's sacrifice of his first-born son in order to effect victory in battle may relate to the story of Jephthah's vow only within the presumption that Jephthah has the same intention to attain victory at the cost of his first and only daughter. It does not explain, however, why Jephthah still keeps and fulfills the vow, *after* he already attains victory.

refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth.” Jephthah’s ill-considered vow should not have been made in the first place for the foremost reason that God detests and forbids child sacrifice. With the vow already made, however, it should have not been kept merely for the sake of the upholding it when the very essence of the vow violates God’s ways in the first place. As Chisholm notes, to obey the Lord in His precepts is better than making a sacrifice.¹⁴

The discussion on vows in chapter 30 of the Book of Numbers illuminates yet another tragic aspect of the fulfillment of the vow: the irony of the mature, protective daughter acquiescing to the father:

When a young woman still living in her father’s household makes a vow to the Lord or obligates herself by a pledge and her father hears about her vow or pledge but says nothing to her, then all her vows and every pledge by which she obligated herself will stand. But if her father forbids her when he hears about it, none of her vows or the pledges by which she obligated herself will stand; the Lord will release her because her father has forbidden her.

A father has the power to annul the vow of his daughter who lives with him and render it ineffective. It is poignant that in Jephthah’s story, the rash vow is made by the father who is supposed to protect his vulnerable daughter but jeopardizes her instead, while his seemingly calm and mature daughter must suffer the consequence of his vow without any chance to annul it for him. If Jephthah so desired, according to the Midrash, “Phineas, the High Priest, could have saved the daughter by annulling the vow, as in talmudic times a High Priest could annul a vow.”¹⁵ Ultimately, the narrator reports that “he [does] to her as he [had] vowed,” and the matter-of-fact, terse statement ironically amplifies the mood of sorrow.

¹⁴ Chisholm, “The Ethical Challenge,” 414-415.

¹⁵ Reiss, “Jephthah’s Daughter,” 62.

The story of Jephthah is one replete with ironies and tension, as his broken life experiences inform his conflicted character, resulting in a dichotomy of outward worship of Yahweh and inward serving of himself. The fact that he is appointed and empowered by God to be a deliverer for Israel does not equate to qualification of righteousness in character– it means that God, in spite of Jephthah’s specific flaws, still works through him to accomplish his purpose and to continue his covenant with the Israelites, even in a time when His people are committing evil in His eyes and instead doing what is right in their own eyes. A literary approach that is employed in this paper makes a lot of presumptions about the narrator’s intention to draw conclusions about the character of Jephthah that may be biased. It would be beneficial also to employ a deeper historical approach as well as source and tradition approaches to Jephthah’s story in the hopes that they may reveal a new understanding and theological implication of Jephthah’s vow story.

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