

JEPHTHAH'S VOW: ITS EXECUTION  
AND MORAL EVALUATION

by

Otto R. Cerny

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Divinity in  
Grace Theological Seminary  
May 1982



Title: JEPHTHAH'S VOW: ITS EXECUTION  
AND MORAL EVALUATION  
Author: Otto R. Cerny  
Degree: Master of Divinity  
Date: May, 1982  
Advisor: Dr. Lee L. Kantenwein

Jephthah, a judge of Israel, made a vow to God in 1087 B.C. before his entrance with Israel into battle against the Ammonites. The vow and the circumstances leading to its execution are covered in Judges 11:30-40. Critical to understanding Jephthah's vow is the determination of what type object Jephthah intended to offer in fulfillment of his vow, how his vow was carried out, and a moral evaluation of the entire proceeding.

As seen from within the historical and cultural context of the Ancient Near East during the time of the Judges, the practice of making vows before a battle was common. Offering human sacrifices before heathen gods was the modus operandi for all the heathen cultures and, unfortunately sporadically, for the nation of Israel. To these factors must be added Jephthah's extreme ignorance of God and His laws. The conclusion is that Jephthah's inclusion of a human sacrifice in his vow was not unusual for the magnitude of the crisis.

When Jephthah's vow is compared to other types of vows found in the Old Testament, it is dramatically lacking in the consistency required to match any specific type of vow. While it has the elements of a conditional pattern, as well as a vow of devotion, and devotion to destruction, the similarities are only partial. Thus the evidence would suggest that Jephthah's vow is representative of a person possessing very little familiarity with the law of Moses on the subject of vows.

An examination of the grammatical and etymological structure of several critical words and phrases clearly points to Jephthah's intent to fulfill his vow with a human sacrifice executed by means of a burnt offering. This is demonstrated by the singular expression of the verbs in "whatever comes out" (  $\chi\gamma\iota\ \tau\psi\chi\ \chi\gamma\iota\tau\iota$  ), "to meet me" (  $\tau\alpha\chi\tau\epsilon\tau\epsilon$  ) which is used only with reference to a person, and "burnt offering" (  $\tau\eta\ \zeta\upsilon$  ) which must be taken in its primary sense of that which is wholly burnt in the flames of the altar.

The remaining narration following Jephthah's vow must be understood on the basis that Jephthah had every expectation of a human sacrifice walking through the door of his house to meet him and being offered up as a burnt offering. His daughter's impending death overshadows her compliance with the vow, her request for two-month's postponement of the burnt offering, the intense feelings concerning her virginity and the dramatic portrayal of grief by the daughters of Israel.

The moral evaluation of the human sacrificial nature of Jephthah's vow is seen in juxtaposition to the universal absolutes of God's moral law. The conclusion reflects a deplorable act, though committed in ignorance, that condemns Jephthah guilty of gross sin.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological Seminary  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree  
Master of Divinity

*Lee L. Kantemuein*

---

Advisor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
Chapter	
I. HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS . . . . .	3
The Background of the Nation Israel . . . . .	3
The Nation Selects Jephthah . . . . .	4
The Immediate Context . . . . .	5
Summary . . . . .	6
II. THE PLACE OF VOWS IN SCRIPTURE . . . . .	7
The Types of Vows . . . . .	8
The Vow of Devotion . . . . .	8
The Vow of Abstinence . . . . .	10
The Vow of Devotion to Destruction . . . . .	10
The General Regulation of Vows . . . . .	11
The Significance behind Jephthah's Vow . . . . .	12
Summary . . . . .	13
III. THE EXEGESIS OF CRITICAL PASSAGES . . . . .	15
The Force of $\int \int \int$ . . . . .	16
The Significance of $X Y' 7 \Psi X X 9 \int \int$ . . . . .	16
The Intent of $\pi \int \int$ . . . . .	17
The Implication of the Conjunction $!$ . . . . .	18
The Meaning of $\int \int \int \int$ . . . . .	19
Summary . . . . .	20
IV. THE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERPRETATION . . . . .	22
Jephthah's Ignorance of the Law's Prohibition of Human Sacrifice . . . . .	22
Jephthah's Familiarity with Human Sacrifice . . . . .	24
Israel's Familiarity with Human Sacrifice . . . . .	29
Jephthah's Meaning of the Burnt Offering . . . . .	32
Jephthah's Intended Object of Sacrifice . . . . .	34
Animal Sacrifice . . . . .	34
Animal and Human Sacrifice . . . . .	35
Human Sacrifice . . . . .	36

Jephthah as a Hero of the Faith . . . . .	37
Jephthah and the Spirit of the Lord . . . . .	38
Jephthah's Daughter's Virginity Emphasized . . . . .	40
Termination of Clan . . . . .	41
Failure of Child Bearing . . . . .	42
Jephthah's Daughter Commemorated by Daughters of Israel . . . . .	43
Summary . . . . .	44
 V. THE MORAL EVALUATION OF JEPHTHAH'S VOW . . . . .	 47
The Motivation behind Jephthah's Vow . . . . .	47
The Content of Jephthah's Vow . . . . .	49
Ethical Approaches Used in the Analysis of Jephthah's Vow . . . . .	49
Ethical Analysis of Jephthah's Vow . . . . .	51
The Fulfillment of Jephthah's Vow . . . . .	54
The Ethical Evaluation by Hierarchicalism . . . . .	55
The Ethical Evaluation by Universal Absolutism . . . . .	57
Summary . . . . .	58
 CONCLUSION . . . . .	 59
 BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	 62

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times a vow is of little significance in the minds of most people. Marriage vows are easily broken; loving-for-life commitments are not taken seriously. Contractual vows in business are often said "not to be worth the paper on which they are written." Political vows last only as long as a person or party believes he or it is likely to gain from the agreement. Even many spiritual vows last only until a difficult time has passed, or the good intent of the vow-maker has subsided. Also, a vow has difficulty being honored even in a court of law. A judge can easily annul the content of a vow made by two consenting parties.

Our attitudes toward vows have vastly changed from those of Israelites living a thousand years prior to Christ when vows were binding, regardless of the cost to the one making the vow. It is in the setting of three thousand years ago and the customs of the Israelite people that we try to examine the vow to God by a military leader of Israel. In the year 1087 A.D., Jephthah, a man of Tob, comes on the scene of Israelite history to lead that nation into battle against the Ammonites. He makes a vow to God that he may have victory over the enemy. The battle is won. The vow is fulfilled. Six years of judgeship of Israel are then abruptly terminated by his death.

Jephthah's vow, as related in Judges 11:30-40, has provided through the centuries a bewildering array of interpretations, with an equal number of moral evaluations. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the

content of Jephthah's vow, determine how it was implemented and consider what moral justification may have existed for its pronouncement and its execution.

It will be demonstrated that Jephthah intended to fulfill his vow of a burnt offering with a human sacrifice, and that his daughter was indeed that sacrifice. Also, it will be shown that Jephthah was morally guilty of sin in the eyes of God for his vow and its implementation.

CHAPTER I  
HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Better cognizance of Jephthah's vow requires that consideration be given to the historical context influencing the issue. There are three areas of influence in the surrounding text that must be examined: The first is the background of the Israelite nation which includes its repudiation of the heathen gods; the second is Jephthah's relationship to Israel as its leader; the third is the immediate context of the vow. Familiarity with these historical contexts is necessary to have a better perception of the setting in which Jephthah's vow is executed.

The Background of the Nation Israel

The general background for the appearance of Jephthah on the scene in Judges 11 is in the days of the Judges when Israel lived in tribal societies, free from the power of a centralized government, yet subject to threats of anarchy and extinction. That background concerns the turning back of the people of Israel from heavy involvement in idolatry and severe hardship, to repentance toward God. The situation had been that "the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the Lord, and served

not Him" (Judg 10:6).<sup>1</sup> Israel had become totally immersed in the paganism of its surrounding neighbors.

As a result of the Israelites forsaking God, the Lord "sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the children of Ammon" (Judg 10:7). After eighteen years of suffering under the domination of their heathen neighbors, they recognized why they were in this situation of tribulation and cried to the Lord, "We have sinned against Thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim" (Judg 10:10). Their repentance was manifested by the removing of all of the false gods and their restoration of Jehovah as the one true God.

The climax immediately follows. It is the year 1087 B.C. and the Ammonites regroup their forces for battle in Gilead while Israel gathers at Mizpeh (Judg 10:17). It is then that the leaders of Gilead realize that they have no one who can effectively lead their forced.

#### The Nation Selects Jephthah

The man, Jephthah, a vanquished Gileadite with a reputation as a valiant warrior, appeared. He was the illegitimate son of Gilead, an Israelite, by a pagan prostitute (Judg 11:1). After being totally rejected by his father and brothers, he fled to the land of Tob, north-east of Gilead, where he gathered a band of followers around him (Judg 11:3).

It was to this man, Jephthah, that the leaders of the area of Gilead came asking him that he be their leader because he was a man of

---

<sup>1</sup>All English Bible citations have been taken from the King James Version.

military capability, and the battle with the sons of Ammon was imminent (Judg 11:3). He accepted on the condition that he would not be cast out after the victory. To this the leaders readily consented and the agreement was ratified before the Lord at Mizpeh (Judg 11:11).

From the moment of the ratification of the agreement, Jephthah's homeless and stateless condition was canceled. Thereafter he completely identified himself with the Lord and His people and spoke on God's behalf. His first major challenge was of diplomatic nature as he tried to negotiate peace with the King of Ammon. As his effort to avert the impending conflict drew to a close, Jephthah concluded with these words, "Wherefore I have not sinned against thee, but thou doest me wrong to war against me: the Lord the Judge be judge this day between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon" (Judg 11:27).

Shortly after the conclusion of the negotiating, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah" (Judg 11:29). The Lord personally placed His own seal upon Jephthah's position by identifying Himself with him.

#### The Immediate Context

As Jephthah stood ready to face the critical nature of the battle before him, he realized that unless God intervened, the powerful Ammonite army would bring about a devastating defeat against Israel. So Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord which required a divine response or guaranteed victory for Israel. Jephthah's commitment in the vow was "that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering" (Judg 11:31).

The battle resulted in a great victory for Israel. As Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpeh, his only daughter was the first person to greet him. Two months later he "did to her according to the vow which he had made" (Judg 10:39).

Following the fulfillment of his vow, Jephthah was visited by the army of the Ephraimites who complained about not being called into the battle against the Ammonites (Judg 12:1). This was not true, for they had actually refused to come to Jephthah's aid. In addition, they also threatened to burn down Jephthah's house. As a result Jephthah summoned his army to do battle against the Ephraimites with the result that forty-two thousand Ephraimites were slain at the place where they crossed the Jordan River into Gilead (Judg 12:6).

The judgeship of Jephthah was cut short after six years by his death. He was buried in one of the cities of Gilead (Judg 12:7).

#### Summary

This is the context surrounding Jephthah's being thrust into a relationship with the nation Israel. The Israelites are again found to have just emerged from a period of intense worship of the gods of their neighbors. The repentant Israelites turn to a renegade Gileadite for leadership at a time of imminent military crisis. Jephthah's consent to leadership and complete identification with the Lord and His people are confirmed by Jehovah to be acceptable. It is these contextual elements from a background of a nation and from a background of a man that play an integral part in the understanding of Jephthah's vow.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PLACE OF VOWS IN SCRIPTURE

One of the first considerations which must be examined is the concept of man's making a vow. The Bible gives abundant evidence that man has made vows in the context of his God through the ages. Where there has been a need during a time of sickness or other affliction, where there has been a time of anxiety or earnest desire, man has made vows to God to be fulfilled when man's desire has been granted. The primary significance behind the vow is the conscious recognition of total dependence upon the will of God and the obligation of thankfulness.<sup>1</sup>

The first vow mentioned in scripture is that of Jacob at Bethel, 1928 B.C. circa. In it he promises that if God will give him a safe journey with adequate provisions to his father's house, then the place where he was would be a sanctuary and he would also give a tenth of his income to the Lord (Gen 28:18-22). This represents the typical bargaining pattern in which something is promised in return for God's presence, protection or provision.

Representative samplings of this conditional vow pattern are found in differing situations by all sorts of characters throughout the Old

---

<sup>1</sup>Davis Dictionary of the Bible, "Vow" by J. D. Davis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 853.

Testament. Hannah, in her humility, prayed for a son and in return promised him to lifelong service to the temple at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:11). The ambitious and corrupt Absalom vowed sacrificial worship on the condition that he would return to his father's favor (2 Sam 15:7-12). Jonah's shipmates made a vow in the hope of deliverance from the storm (Jonah 1:16).<sup>1</sup>

### The Types of Vows

While the Mosaic law did not prescribe the making of vows as a religious duty (Deut 23:22), it did regulate them. This legislation covered three types of vows: The Vow of Devotion; the Vow of Abstinence; The Vow of Devotion to Destruction.

#### The Vow of Devotion

The first was a vow of devotion in which any person or cattle or real property, such as a house or field not already set apart for sacred use, might be devoted and turned over to the sanctuary. The vow pattern could be either a conditional or an unconditional act of pious gratitude.<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 27:2 refers to the execution of this type of a vow as a hard, difficult or extraordinary act to perform as the verb

$\chi \text{ } \overset{\curvearrowright}{\underset{\cdot}{\square}} \text{ } ^{\circ}$  reads in the hiphel imperfect.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, "Vows" by G. Henton Davies, 3:793.

<sup>2</sup>Davis Dictionary, p. 853.

<sup>3</sup>BDB, p. 810.

The Mosaic regulations in Leviticus 27:1-27 covering this type of vow can briefly be set forth in summary as follows:

1. A man could not devote to sacred uses the firstborn of man or beast which was already devoted (Lev 27:26). If he vowed land, he might redeem it or not (Lev 27:16, 20).

2. Animals fit for sacrifice, if devoted, were not to be redeemed or changed, and if a man attempted to do so, he was required to bring both the devotee and the substitute (Lev 27:9, 20, 33). They were to be free from blemish (Lev 22:17-25; Mal 1:14). An animal unfit for sacrifice might be redeemed with the addition of a fifth to the valuation or it became the property of the priest (Lev 27:12, 13).

3. In the case of persons, a man might devote himself, his child (not the firstborn) or his slave. If no redemption took place, the devoted person became a slave of the sanctuary (2 Sam 15:8). Otherwise, he might be redeemed at a valuation according to age and sex (Lev 27:1-7). "Persons devoted to God served at the sanctuary (1 Sam 1:11, 24, 28), but were usually redeemed (2 Kings 12:4), especially as the service of the Levites rendered such devotion as a rule useless."<sup>1</sup>

4. Concerning the general option of redemption, money values as a fixed rate of exchange for vows were placed on men and women at different ages and wealth, on animals, and on a man's house. The exercise of the option of redemption for inherited land was in relation to the year of Jubilee (Lev 27:18).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Davis Dictionary, p. 853.

<sup>2</sup>Unger's Bible Dictionary, "Vow" by Merrill F. Unger, p. 1159.

### The Vow of Abstinence

The second type of vow was that of abstinence in which there was a renunciation of some type of bonafide enjoyment for the glory of God. This would include such acts as fasting in testimony of penitence or in unselfish devotion.<sup>1</sup> David's vow unto the Lord in Psalm 132:3-5 expresses this type of devotion: "Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up unto my bed; I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids, until I find out a place for the Lord, a habitation for the mighty God of Jacob." Such an obligation of abstinence was assumed by the Nazarite as recorded in Numbers 6.

### The Vow of Devotion to Destruction

The third type of vow was that of devotion to destruction. By inference from Exodus 22:20 and Deuteronomy 13:16, only that which had been placed under the judgment of idolatry could be devoted by such a vow. Also, nothing devoted by such a vow was redeemable (Lev 27:28, 29).<sup>2</sup>

A closer examination of the noun וְיָדוּ and the related verb forms found in Leviticus 27: 28, 29 indicate something forbidden and inviolable. Further, within the context of a war situation it carries with it the meaning of the extermination of defeated enemies (Josh 6:17-21).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Brown, Driver, and Briggs adequately summarize

---

<sup>1</sup>Davis Dictionary, p. 853.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 853.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard J. Bamberger, The Torah, A Modern Commentary, Leviticus (New York: The Union of America Hebrew Congregation, 1904), p. 396.

the various aspects of its meaning by stating that the "things hostile to the theocracy, and therefore (in the strictest application) to be either destroyed or, in the case of certain objects (e.g. silver and gold, vessels of brass and iron, Josh. 6:19, 24) set apart to sacred uses."<sup>1</sup>

If anyone should appropriate a portion of the booty that has been placed under the ban as in the case of the sin of Achan, he himself becomes a part of the ban and must be put to death (Deut 7:25; Josh 7:1, 15, 25). "This ban could only fall on a person or the property of a person guilty of incorrigible rebellion against God."<sup>2</sup> Ryrie has this to say concerning the fall of Jericho and the ban placed upon it by God:

When the Lord makes such a pronouncement against the Canaanites and other inhabitants of the land; it is a manifestation of His judicial holiness, and assumes the character of a theocratic penalty against the unrighteousness they practice in their spiritual relationships (cf. Exod 22:18-20). In such cases, the penalty is unqualified death and utter destruction, there are to be no survivors and no booty of the land (cf. Num 21:1-3; Deut 7:1-26; 13:12-18; 20:17-20).<sup>3</sup>

#### The General Regulation of Vows

Some of the general principles concerning the regulations of vows include the following:

---

<sup>1</sup>BDB, p. 356.

<sup>2</sup>G. James Murphey, Book of Leviticus (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1874), p. 316.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Caldwell Ryrie, The Ryrie Study Bible (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), p. 274.

1. Vows were assumed voluntary, but once made were regarded as a sacred and binding duty (Num 30:2; Deut 23:21-23).

2. A vow, especially a vow of abstinence, made by an unmarried daughter, or a wife, was void if disallowed by the father or husband (Num 30:3-16).

3. Vows must not be taken lightly (Prov 20:25).

4. It seems that vows were considered binding only when actually uttered (Deut 23:23).

5. Things forbidden to be offered included the receipts of sinful traffic in prostitution and the price of a dog (Deut 23:18), or a minor of himself (Mark 7:11-13).<sup>1</sup>

#### The Significance behind Jephthah's Vow

Critical to the understanding of the intent of Jephthah's vow in verses 30 and 32 of Judges 11, and what his execution of that vow in verse 39 entailed, is an accurate understanding of what Jephthah was actually saying in his vow. The vow read as follows:

If Thou wilt indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering (Judg 11:30-31).

Looking at Jephthah's motivation behind the vow, it appears that it does indeed recognize the sovereignty of God, and is a promise or a thank offering for victory over the children of Ammon. Behind the vow it

---

<sup>1</sup>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, "Vow" by Paul Lavertoff, 5:3058.

can be seen that Jephthah is bargaining with the Lord. In spite of the fact that the Spirit of God has come upon him, Jephthah is responding to a crisis situation from an attitude of insecurity. He does not envision victory for Israel over Ammon unless God directly intervenes.

#### Summary

In view of the intentions and motivations behind Jephthah's vow, only a very general classification can be made with regard to his vow. It obviously expresses the conditional pattern in its overall framework. It also has the element of a vow of devotion in that whatever comes through the door of his house to meet him will be given to the Lord.

On the other hand, it has the distinctiveness of a vow of devotion to destruction. The person so dedicated to the Lord could not be redeemed and would be put to death when offered up as a burnt offering. In addition, Jephthah, as the highest civil magistrate in the land would have authority to execute such a vow.

It is at this point that the similarities to the vow of devotion abruptly fall short. Nowhere in the context is there any indication given that the person to come through the door of Jephthah's house to meet him is guilty of such flagrant violations of the fundamental laws of the covenant that the death penalty was required. While the subject of the ban was devoted to destruction only at the command of God as an accursed thing and put to death under the sentence of the ban, Jephthah's daughter had done nothing to bring her under the ban.

Thus, Jephthah's vow fails to perfectly qualify under any specific type of vow. Rather, it appears to be representative of a person who had very little understanding of the law of Moses on the subject of vows.



The Force of פִּינִי

The initial request in Jephthah's vow begins by beseeching God directly with pressuring language, "If Thou wilt indeed give . . . ," (Judg 11:30). The verb under examination here is פִּינִי translated "indeed." It is the Qal infinitive absolute from the verb פָּנָה which means to give personally, deliver, or hand to.<sup>1</sup> In this context it is translated adverbially for emphasis in order to generate intensity in the protasis of the vow. Thus, Jephthah is pushing the bargaining mode of discourse to its very limits asking God to really, without fail, personally give him his request.<sup>2</sup> It is this intensity generated in the protasis that leads to an equally intense apodosis in the vow. Jephthah is seen here reacting with intensity to his insecurity in this crisis in which he finds himself.

The Significance of אֲשֶׁר יָצָא מִבְּרַחֲמֵי

That which is the object of Jephthah's vow in a literal translation is "the thing outcoming which comes out" or "the comer-forth who comes forth" ( אֲשֶׁר יָצָא מִבְּרַחֲמֵי ) (Judg 11:31). Here the emphasis is continued with the compound expression of the verb יָצָא which has as its primary meaning to go or come out or forth.<sup>3</sup> It first appears as a Qal active participle prefixed by the definite article to express

---

<sup>1</sup>BDB, p. 678.

<sup>2</sup>Phyllis Tribble, "A Meditation in Mourning: The Sacrifice of the Daughter of Jephthah," Union Seminary Quarterly Review 36:4 (Supplementary Issue, 1981):59.

<sup>3</sup>BDB, p. 422.

an indefinite subject.<sup>1</sup> This is followed by the relative pronoun  $\text{וְיִשְׂרָאֵל}$  and then the verb again in the Qal imperfect which serves to demonstrate the anticipated futurity of the act. While the masculine gender in the verbs reflects no more than standard grammatical usage and therefore cannot be construed to indicate the sex or species of the object, the article and singular expression of the verbs does point to Jephthah's intent to offer an object. The tension of his vow hinges on the vagueness in which it is here expressed. The selection of the object of the vow is left entirely in the hands of Yahweh.

The Intent of  $\text{וְיִשְׂרָאֵל}$

Jephthah said of the object that would walk through his door to meet him, "I will offer it a burnt offering" (Judg 11:31). The Hebrew word  $\text{וְיִשְׂרָאֵל}$  is a feminine noun derived from the verb  $\text{וְיִשְׂרָאֵל}$  which means to go up, ascend or climb. The noun  $\text{וְיִשְׂרָאֵל}$  has two meanings. Its secondary meaning is ascent or stairway. Its primary meaning is "what is laid on the altar."<sup>2</sup> "offering which is burnt wholly,"<sup>3</sup> "whole burnt-offering, that which goes up to heaven (on altar); the whole burnt-offering (beast or fowl) is entirely consumed and goes up in the flame of the altar to God expressing the ascent of

---

<sup>1</sup>Ronald J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax: An Outline (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scripture (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), p. 631.

<sup>3</sup>KB, p. 106.

the soul in worship."<sup>1</sup> There is nothing only partially burned which remains to be eaten by the worshippers and/or the priests.

The  $\Pi \frac{1}{r} \text{y}$  was offered for specific reasons. In times of joy and celebration it served as a gift to express joy and to reverence God (Gen 8:20; 1 Sam 6:14). It also accompanied petitions for God's intervention in times of need (Judg 21:4; Jer 14:12). Common to both of these classes of burnt offerings is the overriding awareness of the need to give honor and homage to the God who is holy. Thus, Jephthah's intent to offer up a burnt offering to Yahweh is quite clear. The same word is used in a similar context in Genesis 22 where God tells Abraham in verse two to take Isaac to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering. Abraham perfectly understood that God was ordering him to sacrifice his son. From the building of the altar, the preparation for the fire and the binding of Isaac upon the altar to the stretching forth of his hand with the knife to slay his son, Abraham had every intention of offering his son as a burnt offering in obedience to God's command (Gen 22:10). Then in verse thirteen, Abraham took the ram which was caught in a thicket and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

#### The Implication of the Conjunction $\text{y}$

The determination behind the vow is exhibited in its culmination in verse thirty-one where it is to belong to Yahweh and it will be

---

<sup>1</sup>BDB, p. 750.

<sup>2</sup>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, "  $\Pi \frac{1}{r} \text{y}$  " by G. Lloyd Carr, p. 667.



activities. It means to recount, to rehearse.<sup>1</sup> The verb only appears one other place in the Hebrew Bible and that is as a piel imperfect in Judges 5:11 where it is translated, "let them recount the victories."

The majority of the versions have translated the verb to mourn or lament while only a few have chosen to understand it to mean celebrate. The latter option would appear to read into the understanding of the word the celebratory interpretation of the vow's fulfillment. However, the best translation appears to be "to recount" or "to commemorate."

#### Summary

The examination of the above critical passages has demonstrated several significant aspects concerning Jephthah's vow. The intensity exhibited in  $\text{פִּי אֵל}$  reflects the insecurity in Jephthah's mind which causes him to make this dramatic appeal to God for unequivocal deliverance in battle. The thrust of the vow is intensified as the article and singular expression of the verbs in  $\text{אֵלָּהּ אֵלָּהּ}$  point to his intention to offer one object in fulfillment of the vow. Beyond this it is God who will resolve the vagueness by selecting the object of the vow. Then the intention to offer the object of God's selection to be wholly consumed as a burnt offering is clearly seen from the understanding of  $\text{אֵלָּהּ}$ . The conjunction  $\text{וְ}$  is to be regarded conjunctively with the purpose showing that the object will belong to God by means of a burnt offering. Finally, the understanding of  $\text{אֵלָּהּ}$  to mean recount so that the women of Israel are viewed as annually commemorating Jephthah's daughter. The context would also suggest that these

---

<sup>1</sup>BDB, p. 1072.

activities would consist of mourning. As the women of Israel remembered and mourned the daughter of Jephthah, their activities might have resembled those of David as he lamented over the death of Saul and Jonathan. The clothes of David and the men with him were torn as they mourned, wept and fasted (2 Sam 1:11-12). David also chanted a lament (2 Sam 1:12-27).

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERPRETATION

An analysis of the interpretation of Jephthah's vow must provide consideration of several points about his understanding of the cultural and religious system that was his frame of reference. This should include his understanding of the Mosaic law, his meaning of burnt offering and the object he intended to have sacrificed. Also to further understand the context of Jephthah's vow it is necessary to know his relationship to the Spirit of the Lord as well as how virginity was regarded by the society of his time. Through an examination of these points it will be shown that the vow was toward a human sacrifice and was regarded as such by Jephthah, his daughter and the women of Israel.

#### Jephthah's Ignorance of the Law's

#### Prohibition of Human Sacrifice

It has been said that "Jephthah was not unacquainted with the law which did forbid human sacrifice. Verses 12 to 23 of Judges 11 give in Jephthah's own words a history of Israel recapped only in Numbers. He demonstrates a thorough acquaintance with the law."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>R. D. Culver, "Did Jephthah Really Slay His Daughter and Offer Her Body as a Burnt Offering?" Evangelical Christian 55:2 (February, 1959):69.

In other words, it is proposed that to know some of Israel's history means that one will also be familiar with much of the nation's law. In spite of Culver's claim to have proved that Jephthah had a "thorough acquaintance with the law," his argument is not at all convincing. Certainly Jephthah demonstrates a knowledge of Israel's dealings with the kings of Ammon, Moab, Edom and Heshbon, but were these events of history of such a secret and hidden nature to be known only from the writings of Moses? Is it not possible that the neighboring countries of Israel were also acquainted with Israel's history apart from direct access to the Pentateuch as the king of the Sons of Ammon demonstrates (Judg 11:13)?

Jephthah was familiar with Israel's history from Egypt through the wilderness of Kedesh, and then on to the Promised Land. This could have been the result of having read or at least heard the history from his own father before he was banished from his home. However, it does not follow that he had a thorough acquaintance with the law. In fact it would appear that the time of Jephthah's youth that he spent with his family was also during the time of Israel's apostasy as described in Judges 10:6. It is not very likely that he would have heard much teaching about the law when the people of Israel were themselves obviously ignoring it as they were in serving the gods of Syria, Zidon, Moab, Ammon and the Philistines.

Consider further what opportunities Jephthah had to obtain instruction in the things of the law of Moses after he was banished from his home until he was invited to become the leader of his own

people. It is not likely that he had a manuscript copy of the law in his possession for study. These were very scarce and expensive. Also his manner of life as a renegade wandering over the heathen countryside of the land of Tob with a band of worthless men, men in difficulty who had nothing to lose, certainly would mitigate any efforts to study the law of Moses.

It might also be pointed out that

from the time of Joshua to the time of Jephthah, something more than two centuries, we find but little said about vows compared with what we find in the time of Saul, David and Solomon, and onward to the captivity. So Jephthah had not the opportunity and advantage of seeing on what occasions others had made vows, and how they kept them. He, therefore, had to be guided by his own interpretation of the law concerning vows, and in view of the trouble he got himself into by making a vow, we may conclude he did not very thoroughly understand the subject.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Jephthah's acquaintance with the historical portions of the law of Moses and lack of familiarity with its precepts seem to be a very logical result of the circumstances surrounding the life that he lived.

#### Jephthah's Familiarity with Human Sacrifice

Upon leaving his home, Jephthah passed many years as an exile with various peoples on the east side of the Jordan River.

Now it is well known that human sacrifices were frequently practiced in Syria as they were also by the Ammonites who made their children pass through the fire to Molech, and it cannot surprise us that a man brought up as Jephthah was and leading the life of a freebooter at the head of a band of Syrian outlaws, should have the common Syrian notion of the efficacy of human sacrifices in great emergencies.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Warren, "Jephthah's Vow," BSac 24:94 (April, 1867):240.

<sup>2</sup>A. C. Hervey, The Pulpit Commentary, Judges (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Co., n.d.), p. 125.

A possible demonstration of Jephthah's semi-heathenism is his comment acknowledging Chemosh and Jehovah in Judges 11:24. He said, "Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the Lord our God has driven out before us, we will possess it." While this could be solely a debater's technique, it could also be the acknowledgement by Jephthah of the existence of both gods in the affairs of men.

Human sacrifice was a practice of long standing extending back to the pre-Mosaic age among the peoples of the Ancient Near East. It is said that during this period

Arabs would sometimes sacrifice a captive youth, while the Carthaginians chose some of the fairest of the captives for offerings by night. Assyrian kings sometimes sacrificed captive kings. The Canaanites and others constantly sacrificed children, especially the firstborn,<sup>1</sup>

Evidence for the practice of child sacrifice among the north-western Semitic peoples is numerous.<sup>2</sup> From Canaanite Gezer comes evidence of a number of infant jar-burials. Several of the jars show evidence of fire and all are in close association with the High Place.<sup>3</sup>

Additional evidence for its continuance among the early Canaanites and the later Phoenicians is provided by inscriptions found in Malta (a Phoenician colony) dating from the 7th and 6th centuries

---

<sup>1</sup>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, "Sacrifice" by J. J. Reeve, 4:2641.

<sup>2</sup>Pictorial Biblical Encyclopedia, "Sacrifice and Offering" by Gaalyahu Cornfield, p. 644.

<sup>3</sup>R. A. S. Macalister, Excavations at Gezer, vol. 2 (1907-1909), Published for the Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund (London: John Murray, 1912), p. 402.

BCE which testify to child sacrifice in the mother country and at Carthage, where it was noted and reported by Roman writers.<sup>1</sup>

Excavations at the sanctuary of Tanit at Salambo, Carthage, uncovered thousands of urns containing cremated remains of small children mostly under the age of two. The lowest strata (8th century BCE) of this very large sanctuary consisted entirely of these urns of burnt children's bones.<sup>2</sup> In the Northern Mesopotamian texts of the tenth-seventh centuries B.C. we hear of the cremation of children in honor of Hadad and Ishtar.<sup>3</sup> In this regard Smith listed the five basic formulae, translated from Assyriologese to English, as they relate child cremation to parties who break contracts.<sup>4</sup> While further illustrations of child sacrifice could be given from other areas where sacrificial stelae, seals and foundation sacrifices also demonstrate the practice, the material already given will serve to show the extent of the practice among the nations of the Ancient Near East. Also, it is significant to note the existence of several stories that are dated approximately 1200 B.C. and are parallel to the account of Jephthah's vow.<sup>5</sup> The

---

<sup>1</sup>Cornfield, "Sacrifice and Offering," p. 644.

<sup>2</sup>Pictorial Biblical Encyclopedia, "Canaan, Gods and Idols, Cult," by Gaalyahu Cornfield (Tel Aviv: Hamikra Baalam Publishing House, Ltd., 1964), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, "Sacrifice and Offering OT.," by T. H. Gaster, 4:153.

<sup>4</sup>Morton Smith, "A Note of Burning Babies," JAOS 95:3 (1975):479.

<sup>5</sup>Alberto Ravinell Whitney Green, The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 162.

account of Agamemnon and Iphigenia at Aulis has a god initiating the demand for sacrifice with Clytemnestra also involved.<sup>1</sup> In the Cretan story, Idomeneus, returning from Troy, vows to sacrifice the first being he meets when he comes to shore. This happens to be his son.<sup>2</sup> Then in Anatolia, a vow is made by Meander to sacrifice the first person to extend congratulations to him should he be victorious in the war. These persons turn out to be his mother, son and daughter.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, these stories originate from regions of Asia Minor just north of the Syria-Palestine area. Further, the Israelites of eastern Palestine located in a territory inhabited by people who had previously migrated from the Anatolian region.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it would appear more than coincidental that the Jephthah narrative, enacted by one who had originally come from the northern region should so closely parallel these nearly contemporary stories from the northern region. Rather, it seems that the parallels of these stories could reasonably be said to portray a common element of the reality of the times concerning the efficacy of human sacrifice.

---

<sup>1</sup>C. Davidson, "Agememnon," The Early Greeks (London: Burrick and Sons, 1948), pp. 391-399.

<sup>2</sup>David Kravitz, Who's Who in Greek and Roman Mythology (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1975), p. 378.

<sup>3</sup>Plutarch, "De Fluviis," The Complete Writings of Plutarch (New York: Colonial Company, 1906), p. ix.

<sup>4</sup>G. M. Landes, "The Material Civilization of the Ammonites," The Biblical Archaeologist Reader, II. D. N. Freedman and E. F. Campbell, Jr., eds. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), pp. 70-72.

Certainly the scriptures acknowledge the practice of human sacrifices among the heathen nations. The warning against idolatry given by God to His people in Deuteronomy 12:29-32 acknowledges that the nations of Western Asia were deeply affected by the practice of offering their children as sacrifices at the time that the Israelites entered the Promised Land. "At times of great calamity, anxiety and danger, parents sacrificed their children as the greatest and most costly offering which they could make to propitiate the anger of the gods and thus secure their favor and help."<sup>1</sup>

Second Kings 3:23 relates an incident that took place about 849 B.C. concerning King Mesha of Moab who, while under seige by Israel and others, sacrificed his son as a burnt offering on the wall of Kirhareth. This was a desperate attempt on the part of the king to placate Chemosh, the god of Moab, and effect a deliverance from Israel, Judah and Edom.

If one is still surprised that Jephthah assumes the leadership role of Israel with heathen notions of human sacrifice, one has only to look at the context which the people of Israel have just forsaken. Judges 10:6 relates that,

the children did evil again in the sight of the Lord and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines and forsook the Lord and served not Him.

This is a description of Israel's total immersion in the paganisms of the nations around her, nations possessing sacrificial systems.

---

<sup>1</sup>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, "Human Sacrifice" by William J. McGlothlin, 4:2658.

It is within the widespread acceptance of the practice of sacrificing sons and daughters that Jephthah presumably spent his years at home and then later in the land of Tob.

#### Israel's Familiarity with Human Sacrifice

When human sacrifice first appeared among the Hebrews is difficult to say. Certainly at the time of Moses it was an issue because of the prohibitions issued against it. The account of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:1-19) implied that the highest sacrifice that could be made was that of the firstborn son. This is confirmed in Exodus 22:29b, "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me," and also Exodus 13:2. However, the account makes clear that such a human sacrifice was not needed or required, and that an animal would be substituted. The redemptive requirement was clearly made for the firstborn son in Exodus 34:20 while the price is still later set at five shekels of silver (Num 18:15-16). A further provision also existed for the tribe of Levi to be substituted for the firstborn of the sons of Israel in the service of the sanctuary (Num 3:11-13: 40-50).

Concerning the issue of human sacrifice the Word of God is very explicit. Leviticus 18:21 states, "Neither shall you give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech." The punishment for such an offense was death by stoning (Lev 20:2). In further declaring God's absolute abhorrence of human sacrifice, the Israelites are commanded not to follow any worship of the Canaanites, "for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters on the fire to their gods" (Deut 12:31). The lives

of others are sacred and are not to be terminated for the private end of an individual, however laudable that end may appear.

Yet, herein, lay the temptation to incorporate aspects of heathen worship into their worship of God.

Any religion that required sacrifice would practice human sacrifices if the theory behind the system were driven to its logical conclusion. For the more valuable the sacrifice, the more 'power' it would have for the one who offered it. This would be true whether the sacrifice was thought to be a communion offering, a gift, or a mystical release of vital life power.<sup>1</sup>

Scriptures record some examples of human sacrifice involving the nation of Israel. It is told in 2 Kings 16:3 of Ahaz, King of Judah (reigning 735-715 B.C.), who "made his son pass through the fire according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out from before the sons of Israel." This was a burnt offering to Molech. During this same time the prophet Isaiah spoke out in condemnation of Israel's idolatrous practice of human sacrifices in Isaiah 57:5, "who slaughter the children in the ravines, under the clefts of the crags." Then another fifty years later 2 Kings 21:6 tells of Manasseh (reigning 695-642 B.C.), King of Judah, who "made his son pass through fire" in the Valley of Ben-hinnom.

Later in condemning the degeneracy of Judah, the prophet Jeremiah writes, "And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire" (Jer. 7:31). Topheth probably means "the place of

---

<sup>1</sup>R. H. Sales, "Human Sacrifice in Biblical Thought" Journal of Bible and Religion 25:2 (April, 1957):112-117.

burning" or "fireplace" from a root meaning "burning,"<sup>1</sup> The location is Gehenna, a valley on the southwest of Jerusalem. Later the prophet castigates them for the intensity of their worship of Baal with human sacrifices when he says, referring to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, "they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal" (Jer 19:4-5).

The prophet Ezekiel, contemporary with Jeremiah, also vehemently spoke out in condemnation of child sacrifice by his people. Three specific passages are in view: Ezekiel 16:20-21; 20:26; 23:37-39. In the first reference the sons and daughters are both included and said to have been slaughtered as a result of passing through the fire. The reference is Ezekiel 20:26, although not entirely clear, does make reference to all the firstborn passing through fire. The last reference more closely parallels the first as their sons pass through the fire and are slain. In each of these cases the sacrifice of the children was to foreign gods, not Yahweh. Thus, from these references it is necessary to conclude that the prophets are referring to a common historical situation reflecting the custom of child sacrifice that was indulged in by the people. Further, this actual child sacrifice was not limited to the firstborn or only sons, but to sons and daughters.<sup>2</sup>

Given the diffusion of human sacrifice that was practiced by Israel's neighbors and the repeated denunciations by the early prophets

---

<sup>1</sup>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, "Topheth" by E. W. G. Masterman, 4:2999.

<sup>2</sup>Green, The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East, p. 177.

of the practice as contrary to God's will, it is a clear implication that it must also have been practiced by the early Hebrew tribes to some degree after they entered the Promised Land. The worshippers were acquainted with some kind of real human sacrifice and, indeed, they practiced the rite. However, whether or not they practiced human sacrifice to Yahweh cannot be determined. In fact, to the extent that Israel turned away from serving the Lord and sought after the gods of her neighbors the practice of human sacrifice would inevitably increase. While condemned by God, yet in times of crisis, the condemnation of human sacrifice was ignored, and some leaders and people reverted to the primitive practice of offering their children as human sacrifices to the gods of the land. Certainly the latter period of the monarchy, as noted above, indicates the widespread observance of this evil custom in Judah, particularly in the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, but even beyond as Jeremiah's prophetic denunciations describe it.<sup>1</sup> "If such practices were followed by leaders in Israel at a later period, it is not impossible that they could have been introduced at this earlier period."<sup>2</sup>

#### Jephthah's Meaning of the Burnt Offering

There are those who hold the position that  $\text{לָאֵלֹהִים}$  could not mean burnt offering in this context. For example, Keil understands  $\text{לָאֵלֹהִים}$  to mean "that of going upon the altar, or of complete

<sup>1</sup>See p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Davis, Conquest and Crisis, p. 122.

surrender to the Lord."<sup>1</sup> Culver in describing this interpretation, says that the word  $\text{לָבֵן}$  translated "burnt offering" does not have anything to do with fire necessarily. The word simply means "that which goes up." "Even when it does refer to a burnt offering, it is not to the fire as such, but to the fact that the entire offering ascended. The essential idea in the word is complete dedication to God."<sup>2</sup>

However, an objective examination of  $\text{לָבֵן}$  shows its primary meaning to be "that which is laid on the altar and wholly burnt." This obviously represents more than a mere exercise in semantics. To be sure, the noun does have its derivation from the verb which means to go up or ascend. And it certainly cannot be denied that behind the burnt offering is the idea that that which is placed upon the altar and entirely consumed by the fire is indeed for the purpose of being completely offered up to God. The burnt offering represented the most solemn of the sacrifices and symbolized worship in the fullest sense.

And, yet, the primary meaning must be accepted. As Davis has stated, "The Hebrew word for burnt offering is  $\text{לָבֵן}$  and always has the idea of a burnt sacrifice in the Old Testament."<sup>3</sup> Thus, to emphasize anything but the normal meaning of the word is to pervert the ordinary intent of the author so that the means can lead to the reader's predetermined conclusion. Therefore, Jephthah had in mind that an

---

<sup>1</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Joshua, Judges, Ruth (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 395.

<sup>2</sup>Culver, "Did Jephthah Really Slay His Daughter?" p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Davis, Conquest and Crisis, p. 127.

object would be put on an altar and completely consumed by fire as it was offered up to God.

#### Jephthah's Intended Object of Sacrifice

The claim that Jephthah intended a human to come out of his front door to greet him is endorsed by both those who propose a human burnt offering as well as those who propose a dedication to temple service. In opposition to this claim is the suggestion that consideration be given to the possibility that Jephthah intended an animal to be the object that would walk through his door for the intended sacrifice.

#### Animal Sacrifice

The possibility that Jephthah might have intended to offer an animal sacrifice must be examined. Boling is one proponent of the burnt offering interpretation who finds it "reasonable for Jephthah to assume that the first creature to wander out of his house when he returned would be an animal (sheep, cow, goat) acceptable for sacrifice."<sup>1</sup> This is based on the assumption that the houses of this time were built to accommodate animals as well as people. However, the notion that animals lived with the people in their houses is false.

Animals were not kept in the houses of even peasants, much less leaders like Jephthah. About the only possible animal which might "come out of the doors of the house" to meet him would have been a dog, and even dogs were not often made pets. Besides, Jephthah, even supposing him to have been ever so ignorant, would have known better than to sacrifice a dog to Jehovah."<sup>2</sup>

Only certain clean animals such as cattle, sheep and kids as well as

---

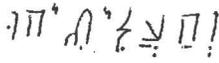
<sup>1</sup>Robert G. Boling, The Anchor Bible, Judges (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1975), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup>Culver, "Did Jephthah Really Slay His Daughter?" p. 70.

fowl, such as turtledoves, and young pigeons, were acceptable for sacrifice (Lev 9:3; 5:7; Num 7:17).

It is just as righteous to suppose that Jephthah was promising to give the first calf or kid that came running out of his house to meet him. If Jephthah had an animal sacrifice in mind, he would have been specific in his promise of a vow. Also, it is extremely doubtful that Jephthah had an animal sacrifice in mind at all, for such a formal vow as his was quite unnecessary to bring an animal sacrifice after a great victory.<sup>1</sup> Considering the pending crisis with the Ammonites, he would have promised many of the best bulls, goats and sheep, which would have been in keeping with the general custom of the time.

#### Animal and Human Sacrifice

Another variation that employs the options for both the dedication of a person to temple service, as well as the burnt offering of an animal, as advocated by Wood,<sup>2</sup> incorporates the alleged disjunctive use of the conjunction "waw" in  of Judges 11:31. This depends upon the translation of the particle as "or" instead of "and," so that the translation would then read, "it shall be Jehovah's or I will offer it up for a burnt offering." By this rendering, it is thought that Jephthah is to have said that if the first-comer from the door of my house to meet me is a human, he will be the Lord's in service, or if it is a clean animal, I will offer it as a burnt offering. This, however,

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Conquest and Crisis, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Wood, A Survey of Israel's History (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 224.

is inadmissible. "Nowhere in the entire Old Testament, unless this be the exception (and one other very questionable case--2 Kings 18:27) is this translation permitted."<sup>1</sup>

#### Human Sacrifice

The natural, and indeed necessary, interpretation of the words of Jephthah's vow indicate that he had a human sacrifice in mind. He could not expect anything but a person to come forth from the door of his house because only a person could come forth "to meet him" ( 'אֵלֶיךָ יֵצֵא ). This is a common phrase that is always spoken of people (Gen 14:17; 24:65; Exod 4:14; 18:7; Num 20:20). Further, the notion of the efficacy of human sacrifices in times of dire emergency would have been a common understanding for Jephthah who had spent many years of exile among the Syrians who frequently resorted to this practice. It was also a time when the law of Moses was little known or practiced.

Jephthah might very well have expected that the fulfillment of his vow would involve the sacrifice of one of his many servants. This seems to be indirectly demonstrated by Jephthah's reaction to the sight of his daughter coming through the door. He rent his clothes in a gesture of despair and grief (Judg 11:35). He expected anyone else but his daughter. Instead of being the joyous recipient of the celebration of victory by his daughter in the previous verse, he exclaims, "Alas, my daughter, thou has brought me low." This serves to underscore even further the sudden drop in his countenance as he recognized what the

---

<sup>1</sup>Culver, "Did Jephthah Really Slay His Daughter?" p. 70.

reality of the circumstance he had just witnessed meant in terms of his vow and his commitment that he could not turn back. His bitter sorrow lay in the fact that God did not intervene by letting only a servant be the first to come forth from his house. Anyone of his servants coming through the door would not have caused the anguish that he experienced.

#### Jephthah As a Hero of the Faith

It has been argued that since Jephthah is mentioned among the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11:32, he could not have offered his daughter as a burnt offering. Only her dedication to temple service would qualify him for such honorable mention. Bustanoby explains this reasoning by saying, "It's not likely he would have been listed if guilty of burning his daughter on an altar. Even if this zeal were misplaced, he hardly makes a worthy example of a hero."<sup>1</sup> All of those listed were, indeed, godly men and women who exhibited great examples of faith. But who is to say that none of these committed sin, or that Jephthah's sin of committing his daughter to a burnt offering would disqualify him from mention by the writer of Hebrews where the issue is clearly stated to be that of faith? Certainly one must not elaborate upon the evil deeds of Rahab, Samson, and David to prove that this argument is ineffective.

It is interesting to note that Samuel also recognizes Jephthah as among the distinguished persons raised up by God for the deliverance of His people (1 Sam 12:11). Introduced as a mighty man of valor in

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Bustanoby, "Sacrificing Jephthah's Daughter," Eternity 16:2 (February, 1965):17.

Judges 11:1, Jephthah's career is distinguished by his success as evidence of divine favor. His victories stopped the Ammonite invasions until the days of Saul some fifty years later (1 Sam 11:1ff.).

Jephthah stands out as one of the few judges of his era in which his allegiance to God is seen in thought and in word as well as in deed. This is in spite of the fact that his vow clearly represents him in that situation as coming from a position of ignorance concerning the precepts of the law of Moses on that subject. Measured by modern standards, his vow is seen as superstitious, cruel, insane and a blasphemy before God. Yet, when viewed by the only standard that Jephthah knew in which "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25), his conduct was most noble. Expecting great things from God, he promised his best in return, human sacrifice. His deep respect, devotion and loyalty to God is demonstrated by his indomitable will wherein he overcame personal grief and love to his daughter in order to fulfill his vow.

#### Jephthah and the Spirit of the Lord

The coming of the Spirit of the Lord upon Jephthah has been used to claim that he could not have offered his daughter as a burnt offering. This view seems to incorporate the understanding that the placing of the Spirit of God upon him would henceforth guarantee that all of his future acts would be without sin.

The relationship between the Spirit of the Lord and Jephthah corresponds to similar experiences by other judges such as Othniel in Judges 3:10 and Gideon in Judges 6:34 and Samson in Judges 14:19. In the case of certain Old Testament saints such as these the Holy Spirit

temporarily abided with them. This relationship with the Spirit of the Lord is to be seen in contrast to the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God in all believers from the day of Pentecost on (John 14:17). Further, the phrase does not mean that henceforth Jephthah was altogether and continually under the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord so that all that he did was inspired by the Spirit of truth and wisdom. Rather, "to him was given this supreme privilege and honor of being identified openly with God."<sup>1</sup> It was the Spirit of the Lord that inspired him with extraordinary strength and power for the great task of leading Israel to battle against the Ammonites.

Two facts of sharp contrast are pointed out by Cundall. First, Jephthah, by the coming of the Spirit of the Lord upon him, became a charismatic hero, empowered by God to effect the deliverance of his people. Second, Jephthah shows his lack of appreciation of the character and requirements of the Lord and also a lack of confidence in the divine enablement by seeking to secure the favor of God by his rash vow.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, Jephthah clearly and unequivocally knew where his allegiance was. In Judges 11:27, as he concluded his dialogue with the king of Ammon, he gave all the honor to the Lord. Equally important, he acknowledged the sovereignty of God as he committed the outcome of the confrontation between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon to the Lord, the Judge.

---

<sup>1</sup>John E. Hunter, Judges and a Permissive Society (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corp. 1975), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, Judges-Ruth (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), p. 146.

It was then that God, having brought His man from the land of Tob, was now ready to put him into action and place the Spirit of the Lord upon Jephthah. To what degree Jephthah was aware of the Spirit of the Lord upon him is difficult to say. However, it does seem certain that the presence of the Spirit of the Lord with Jephthah did not provide him with additional knowledge concerning the precepts of the law of Moses of which he was not otherwise aware.

From the perspective of hindsight, the outcome of the battle is known. In fact, we know that Jephthah would have won without making a vow. We know that God did not require a vow, and certainly did not want a human sacrifice for the offering. Yet, with the uncertain knowledge Jephthah possessed and his great desire to win the impending battle for the Lord and His people, he made the vow. In spite of the fact that he was making a bargain with God in which his portion was the promise of a thank offering consisting of a human sacrifice, Jephthah was nonetheless demonstrating his intense desire to please the Lord. The dominant philosophy of this day was a moral and spiritual relativism in which "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21-25). Many of Israel's leaders were affected by this attitude.<sup>1</sup>

#### Jephthah's Daughter's Virginitv Emphasized

It has been argued that if Jephthah's vow was in fact fulfilled through the death of his daughter as a literal burnt offering, there would be no reason for the emphasis that is placed on her virginitv.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Conquest and Crisis, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Warren, "Jephthah's Vow," BSac 24:94 (April, 1867):245.

However, it is just this type of interpretation of the passage that ignores the fine skill, sensitivity and reserve of the Hebrew writer in leaving the final fulfillment of the vow to the reader's imagination. As a consequence it misses much of the impact of the feelings surrounding the virginity issue that are actually being portrayed in anticipation of the daughter's death.

After Jephthah had told his daughter the nature of his vow and his complete reluctance to deviate from compliance, his daughter responded with complete understanding and willingness to comply with its fulfillment by her death (Judg 11:36). She never tried to seek a way of escape, but saw death as a part of the price of loyalty to be paid for the victory that God had given the Israelites over the sons of Ammon. That her death would be premature, a violent death by fire, and caused by the foolish vow of her father, seems to suggest that the idea of a human sacrifice was not so strange to this innocent victim's mind as it is to ours today. Part of our problem is that we are not accustomed to thinking within the context of the Israelite mindset in the Ancient Near East of three thousand years ago. We find it difficult to accept the death of Jephthah's daughter as assuming only a secondary importance in the text against the apparent greater concern for her virginity. However, several factors come into play as the daughter's virginity is bewailed.

#### Termination of Clan

The first factor regarding the virginity of Jephthah's daughter is that his daughter's death represents the termination of the clan of

Jephthah himself. As Jephthah's only child, the literal Hebrew in Judges 11:34 says, "And she only was an only one," her death as a virgin would leave her father without family in Israel. This was a tragedy to any Jew.

Behind this is seen the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 23:2 which states that, "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." Jephthah, as the illegitimate son of a harlot, was half Canaanite by birth and, therefore, not a proper Israelite for acceptance as a member of his father's clan. By the providence of God he entered and remained in that clan for six years until his death. Yet the death of his only child absolutely determined that none of his descendants would ever become members of "the congregation of the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

#### Failure of Child Bearing

The second factor relates to the attitude of women in ancient Israel that viewed the inability to bear children as a severe tragedy of a life unfulfilled. This strong desire of Hebrew women to be mothers is born out by the testimonies of such women as Sarah (Gen 16:2, 5), Rachael (Gen 30:1), and Hannah (1 Sam 1:11). To Jephthah's daughter the saddest part of her fate was the prospect of dying unmarried.

In considering celibacy as related to the temple service, the issue is whether or not the celibacy requirement for women in the

---

<sup>1</sup>Hunter, Judges and a Permissive Society, p. 93.

tabernacle at Shiloh did actually exist within that context. Culver says that, "except for an incidental note in 1 Samuel 2:22 and another in Exodus 38:8, we would not know that there were orders of unmarried female servants in the tabernacle and temple service, but such there were."<sup>1</sup> This argument for groups of virgins serving the Lord at the tabernacle at this time is an extremely weak one. Davis, therefore, puts forth this evaluation:

The women referred to in 1 Samuel 2:22 and Exodus 38:8 are not clearly associated with the tabernacle as permanent residents. Also, there is no evidence in this text, or any other text in the Old Testament, that women should be treated in the sense of nuns. Perpetual virginity and childlessness were looked upon as the greatest of misfortunes. There is no law or custom in the Old Testament that intimates that a single woman was looked upon as more holy than a married one. We might point out that Deborah and Huldah were both prophetesses and were both married.<sup>2</sup>

#### Jephthah's Daughter Commemorated by Daughters of Israel

It is argued that the expression "to lament" in verse 40 should be translated "to celebrate" or "to praise" which would be a more appropriate activity of the women of Israel for Jephthah's daughter as a living sacrifice than if she had been a holocaust.<sup>3</sup> The living sacrifice interpretation of the vow's fulfillment would require this meaning for consistency.

---

<sup>1</sup>Culver, "Did Jephthah Really Slay His Daughter?" p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Davis, Conquest and Crisis, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup>Bustanoby, "Sacrificing Jephthah's Daughter," p. 18.

However, *אָנָה* means to recount or to rehearse. Therefore, a translation more in line with this meaning would seem to be "commemorate." What is involved in the commemorative activities will depend upon how one views the fulfillment of the vow. Because it is the position of the writer that the vow was fulfilled by Jephthah as he placed his daughter upon an altar as a literal burnt offering, the content of the commemorative activities would be mourning and lament. Thus, there is instituted a four-day period of remembrance by the women of Israel of this girl who dies childless.

The unnamed virgin becomes a tradition in Israel recognized by activities of mourning repeated yearly.<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as the annual lamentation in remembrance of the daughter of Jephthah is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament, it may be that the memorial tradition was confined to the region of Gilead.<sup>2</sup> Epiphanius says that in the day in which he lived (4th century A.D.) Jephthah's daughter was honored at Shechem by the Greek name "Kore" (maiden).<sup>3</sup>

#### Summary

In attempting to evaluate how Jephthah intended to fulfill his vow, his familiarity with the Mosaic law's prohibition of human sacrifice becomes a key factor with which to be dealt. The evidence

---

<sup>1</sup>Tribble, "A Meditation in Mourning," p. 66.

<sup>2</sup>Cundall and Morris, Judges-Ruth, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup>Epiphanius, Contra. Haeres, 1, 2 (Basilae; 1544), p. 55.

strongly suggests that his familiarity with the law and its prohibitions was negligible. During the days of his youth while living with his father, Gilead, Israel was immersed in the worship of heathen gods. It is not likely that much instruction in the law was heard by anyone during those times. In fact, it just may be that the efficacy of human sacrifice was suggested then. Nevertheless, Jephthah's years of exile east of the Jordan were among the heathen who worshipped the same gods that Israel had, and with them sacrifice of humans was an accepted way of life.

When Jephthah made his vow he had every expectation that some human being would meet him at the door of his house when he returned from battle. His intention was that that person would be the human sacrifice required for the fulfillment of his vow to God. The actual dedication to the Lord would be by means of a burnt offering in which the person was laid on an altar and wholly consumed by fire.

All else that follows in the narration must be understood on the basis of this interpretation of Jephthah's vow. The impact of the feelings and attitudes concerning his daughter's virginity are portrayed clearly against the background of her impending death. First, there is the reality of the fact that as the only child, her death would mark the termination of Jephthah's clan. Then, for one in the bloom of youth with all of the latent potential of marriage and the resulting child-bearing years still before her, Jephthah's daughter's death without ever having bore children represents a severe tragedy of a life unfulfilled.

"No garish details of the sacrifice itself are given, but by a delicate touch here, and an understatement there, an impression of dignified tragedy is created."<sup>1</sup> The daughters of Israel are then left to commemorate this girl who dies childless annually in a four-day period of remembrance and mourning. Thus, the conclusion of a well-intentioned vow that ends in tragedy.

Jephthah's vow stands as a reminder that good intentions in serving God when made from a position of ignorance can be hazardous and lead to tragic consequences. Having explored the circumstances leading to Jephthah's vow as well as his purpose for making it and how it was implemented, what kind of moral judgments can be made concerning the ethics involved? On the basis of what type of criteria will this evaluation be made? It is the purpose of the next chapter to explore this issue.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cundall and Morris, Judges-Ruth, p. 149.

## CHAPTER V

### THE MORAL EVALUATION OF JEPHTHAH'S VOW

Jephthah's vow as stated in verses 30 and 31 of chapter 11 of Judges is related without comment from the text and therefore leaves the reader the responsibility to pass his own sentence upon the deed. The issue of what actions are right or wrong can only be settled on the basis of what makes an action right or wrong. What criteria one will use to judge a moral action will center upon one of two options: either one will use divine legislation or else the entire burden will be placed upon a man to decide for himself. In examining Jephthah's vow, consideration will first be given to the freedom and moral responsibility that he possessed to invoke such a vow. Then moral consideration will be given to the actual content of the vow.

#### The Motivation behind Jephthah's Vow

The type of vow under consideration is the most ancient as well as the most common in which the primary motivation was to obtain success in or deliverance from God in an existing or future undertaking. In exchange for a favorable response from God, the person making the vow promises to do or to give something in the future. An example of such a vow would be that of Jacob in Genesis 28:30, 31, just before he went

on his journey into Mesopotamia. These vows are always voluntary and, therefore, never necessary. "However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you" (Deut 23:22). Yet from the position of man's weakness vows were allowable by the graciousness of God.

The motivation for Jephthah's vow stemmed from his immediate situation and his appraisal of it. First, he must have experienced a measure of frustration over his failure to negotiate a peace with the Ammonites in this time of national emergency. He did, however, yield the results of their unfruitful negotiations to the Lord as judge. While the Spirit of Jehovah had come upon Jephthah to clearly establish divine approval for the events that followed and to insure their successful outcome, Jephthah did not appear to be aware that he had been empowered by God to bring about the deliverance of His people. He did not see the battle as the Lord's, and therefore he lacked confidence in any divine enablement from which to draw the conviction and courage required to lead the people. As he brought up his troops from the Israelites settled east of the Jordan River to their base camp at Mizpeh of Gilead (Judg 11:29), doubt concerning divine help and insecurity about his own future overcame him. Thus, with little faith he was brought to the desperate position of seeking to secure a favor of God in the form of a divine response of victory over the formidable Ammonite armies (Judg 11:30, 31). Jephthah wanted desperately to win the battle for God's sake, for His people's sake, and for his own sake, but he did not see the reality of such an outcome apart from his initiation of a significant vow. There is no indication that he gave

any consideration to what opinion those around him would have of his vow. He did that which was right in his own eyes.

In all that transpired Jephthah remained all too willing to acknowledge Jehovah as the Deliverer of Israel. To Jehovah should be the glory when Israel returned in victory. No honor was to be diverted to Jephthah as he executed his thank offering. Even though the motivations behind Jephthah's vow were of little faith, insecurity, and frustration, these human weaknesses still did not disqualify him as a believer from the privilege of making a vow to God.

#### The Content of Jephthah's Vow

Turning to the content of Jephthah's vow, it seems best to consider it in two separate aspects. The first is that of his offering a human sacrifice in fulfillment of the burnt offering of his vow. This has previously been demonstrated to be the most reasonable understanding for the object of his vow.<sup>1</sup> Then, second, consideration will be given to the actual fulfillment of his vow.

#### Ethical Approaches Used in the Analysis of Jephthah's Vow

In making an evaluation of the moral rightness of Jephthah offering a human as a burnt offering to God, it must be pointed out that there are certain basic approaches to ethics that will not be considered here because they are a denial of deontological norms, i.e. norms that are inherently right. The first of these is antinomianism

---

<sup>1</sup>See p. 36.

in which no moral principles are acknowledged and, therefore, no basis exists for moral standards from which to make moral judgments. Thus, acts are evaluated as either morally good or bad depending on one's perspective. The second is situationalism which has but one universal norm, absolute love, capable of adapting to all situations. "All laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms are only contingent, only valid if they happen to serve love in any way."<sup>1</sup> There is only one end, one goal, one purpose which is not relative and contingent, always an end in itself. Love."<sup>2</sup> Love justifies the means.

There are two approaches that will be primarily utilized in this section. One is Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism. The other is non-conflicting absolutism. Geisler's approach

maintains a hierarchical arrangement or ordering of ethical norms based on the relative scale of values they represent. It implies a pyramid of normative values which in and of themselves are objectively binding on men. But when any two or more of these values happen to conflict, a person is exempted from his otherwise binding obligation to a lower norm in view of the preemptory obligation of the higher norm.<sup>3</sup>

Under this system the norm that one has been exempted from is not considered to have been broken, but merely transcended so that no moral guilt is involved.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>3</sup>Norman L. Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), p. 114.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 131, 136.

The other approach is that of the non-conflicting absolutism. This position holds that there are many universal norms which never really conflict. There may be apparent conflicts between two ethical norms, but never a real conflict of duties. Behind this is the understanding that a wise God never gives conflicting laws, even in a fallen world. These commands represent an unconditional duty or imperative of what man ought to do without any "ifs, ands, or buts" about it. The consequences of these actions are to be left in the hands of God.

#### Ethical Analysis of Jephthah's Vow

Was Jephthah morally right in offering a blank form of vow before God in which he would leave the selection of the person to be offered as the burnt offering to the providence of God? Unlike the laws of the heathen nations around them, the law of Moses never granted the power of life and death to a father over his children or to a master over his servants or slaves. While there were death penalties authorized for specific violations such as the death penalty by burning for adultery in Leviticus 20:14, and killing in combat or war-type situations was allowed, the sixth commandment remained inviolate: "Thou shalt not murder" (Exod 20:13). To violate this commandment would result in the death of the guilty person (Gen 9:6).

An aspect of a humanistically acceptable form of murder is man's offering up of another person as a physical sacrifice to God. This is contrary to the divine viewpoint concerning the sacredness of human life. Repeatedly God condemned the children of Israel for this

practice in Leviticus 18:21 and again in Deuteronomy 12:31 and 18:10 where it is described as detestable to God. The physical sacrifice of sinful man as an offering to God is a fearful offense against Him and invites judgment (Jer 7:30-40). Since the essence of sacrifice is the devotion of man to God, human sacrifice represents an attempt to bypass God's law and find a man-made way to God. Human sacrifice is thus humanistic to the core: it is atonement by man on his own terms.<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious from numerous references from the scriptures mentioned above that God specifically commands that His people are not to offer human sacrifices to Him. This should be taken as a universal norm with no unspecifiable or indefinable exceptions.

Jephthah, who knew well that he was no priest or theologian, vowed a vow to his God which was a common practice among ancient people before going into battle. He had been living among heathen who offered human sacrifices to pagan deities, and as such did not hold the value and respect for human life that God intended. It was also in a day when the law of Moses was little known or practiced among God's people, as seen in Judges 10:6. Although just prior to Jephthah's call to head the nation, Israel's religious ethical base had shifted again from conformity with the heathen nations around it to conformity to God's ways. Jephthah seems to sincerely have thought that Jehovah would need to be propitiated by some offering as costly as those which bled on the altars of Chemosh and Molech. Thus, he intentionally promised a human

---

<sup>1</sup>Rousas John Rushdoony, The Institutes of Biblical Law (Craig Press, 1973), p. 80.

sacrifice, probably intending that it would be one of the woman servants of his household to greet him in the traditional manner.<sup>1</sup> From his extremely limited knowledge of God through the Mosaic law he did not know that God did not desire to be honored in this way. Had he known that God considered human sacrifice an abomination, it is not likely that Jephthah would have knowingly jeopardized his position before God at such a crucial time. "It was his zeal to vow, it was his sin to vow rashly."<sup>2</sup>

If Jephthah actually believed, based upon his knowledge of Jehovah, that a human sacrifice would be pleasing to Jehovah, was its specification in his vow morally wrong? In other words, could the ethical values of the heathen culture of Jephthah's time, of which he was the most familiar, be imposed upon the precepts of the law of Moses? First of all, it must be acknowledged that God's moral laws have an intrinsic value because they are based upon His nature and therefore, rooted in His holiness. They are always the same and, therefore, absolutes in every situation. A violation of one of God's laws is a sin against the very character of God regardless of the sincere intentions of that person. Leviticus 4 and 5 clearly acknowledge the existence of "sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the Lord" (Lev 4:2) and the restitution that is required for forgiveness. Therefore, through ignorance of the law or in an advertency where the

---

<sup>1</sup>The New Bible Dictionary, "Jephthah" by John Rea, J. D. Douglas, editor, p. 605.

<sup>2</sup>Cundall and Morris, Judges-Ruth, p. 147.

conscience never acknowledges a transgression, one nevertheless sins. The fact that the vow was open-ended in order to allow God the freedom to choose the person to be sacrificed does not in any way serve to mitigate the severity of Jephthah's sin. Jephthah transgressed the law of God by vowing to offer a human sacrifice and he sinned. "For sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). Further, sin is always followed by a judgment or penalty to be paid.

#### The Fulfillment of Jephthah's Vow

God gave Israel victory over the Ammonites in spite of the sinful content of Jephthah's vow (Judg 11:32-33). While God's purpose was to bring about victory for Israel, this in no way is to indicate His approval of Jephthah's vow. Then as Jephthah returns to his home in Mizpeh, God according to His sovereign will allows Jephthah's daughter to be the first person to greet Jephthah. To fulfill his vow, he sacrificed his own daughter. Could he have avoided the sacrifice of his daughter in exchange for another option?

It first must be understood that God's Word declares the nature of a vow to be just as binding as that of an oath. It entailed a sacred and binding obligation to execute that which one promised to perform (Deut 23:21, 23). Solomon reiterated this in Ecclesiastes 5:4, "When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!"

Jephthah indicated his awareness that a vow once made had to be paid. While the Mosaic law in Leviticus 27 makes provision for the redemption of persons or things devoted to God, Jephthah was either not

aware of these provisions or, more than likely, saw in his vow a duty to fulfillment that was absolutely binding as stated and not redeemable by money. From Jephthah's own conscious perspective the rashness of his vow involved his failure to specify the category of person he intended to sacrifice and not that he intended only a human sacrifice. It is obvious from his exclamation in Judges 11:36 that he never had any intention of offering his only child.

Was Jephthah right in sacrificing his daughter? Or should he have made some form of an animal substitution? Or should he have disregarded his obligation to fulfill his vow to Jehovah? What should have been the morally correct response for Jephthah as he approached the fulfillment of his vow?

#### The Ethical Evaluation by Hierarchicalism

Applying Geisler's hierarchicalism to the moral dilemma of Jephthah's vow fulfillment is to consider the general hypothesis that lower ethical principles ought to be "broken" when it is necessary to keep a higher one. This means that absolute norms are only relatively absolute within their context.<sup>1</sup>

The particular ethical norm that is applicable here is that an infinite person is of intrinsically higher value than a finite person. Thus, while all personhood and personal relationships are valuable,

the personhood of the infinite and personal relationship with the infinitely personal Being are of unlimited value. Whenever there

---

<sup>1</sup>Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, p. 132.

is a conflict between the value of finite persons and the infinitely personal Being, one must choose in favor of the latter over the former.<sup>1</sup>

Applying this hypothesis to Jephthah's situation, there is the conflict between two absolute moral laws: thou shalt not offer human sacrifice to thy God, and thou shalt not delay to pay thy vow to the Lord your God. The first involves Jephthah's relationship with the finite person, while the second involves his relationship with God. Ethical hierarchicalism would conclude that because the person of God and one's relation to God are of higher value than the person of man or personal relations with man, Jephthah acted properly in recognizing his duty to God by complying with his vow in the sacrifice of his daughter. This was the intrinsically higher value involving the greatest good that a man could perform by fulfilling his duty to the infinitely valuable Person.<sup>2</sup>

The lower principle of offering human sacrifices to God, while a valid ethical norm, was "not really broken, it was transcended" and, thus Jephthah was given an "exemption from" it.<sup>3</sup> What this exemption means is the absence of any moral guilt. No evil has been committed, but rather the greatest good has been executed. "No one is held morally guilty, as in ideal absolutism, for performing the most loving act possible under the circumstances."<sup>4</sup>

The weaknesses behind the application of the hierarchical approach in arriving at an ethical evaluation of Jephthah's vow

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>4</sup>Erwin Lutzer, The Morality Gap (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 103.

fulfillment are several. The determination of the hierarchy of the ethical norms must be arrived at on the basis of individual human efforts which automatically leads to variations. Then once the hierarchy is established and applied to individual circumstances the once universal norms begin to be transcended by higher ones, and therefore, are no longer universal. Finally, when one has violated a transcended universal norm, he is automatically exempted from any guilt for such a violation.<sup>1</sup> This comes back to man as the one ultimately responsible for determining what is ethical based on the specifics of the situation. Therefore, the guilt-free solution under the hierarchical analysis of Jephthah's vow is not correct.

#### The Ethical Evaluation by Universal Absolutism

An alternate view of Jephthah's decision recognizes that he first sinned by transgressing God's law forbidding human sacrifices when he made human sacrifice a necessary part of his vow. Even though he may have violated God's law in ignorance, he was nevertheless guilty of sin. This sin led to the further moral conflict that arose in his fulfillment of the vow. Inasmuch as Jephthah saw his decision to complete the vow as grievous only because it was his daughter that he would sacrifice and not another servant, he apparently remained ignorant of the compounding sin in which the fulfillment of the vow would result. Jephthah rashly made a vow from ignorance and, then resolutely but blindly, carried it out. The result was a progressive sin pattern

---

<sup>1</sup>Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, p. 136.

from the vow to its fulfillment in which his daughter was purposely sacrificed, or murdered.

#### Summary

If his vow was to be evaluated based strictly upon his intentions, one could say that Jephthah was not guilty of any sins. However, the moral laws of God have intrinsic value apart from circumstances and, therefore, any violation thereof is sin. Had Jephthah understood the issues involved after he had made the vow, but before he fulfilled it, his decision should have been to avoid any type of human sacrifice by means of a redemption based upon a monetary settlement or an animal(s) sacrifice. His choice would have been the lesser of two evils.

Hervey rightly concludes that,

Our conviction of wrong is a reason for not keeping our promise. A promise to do evil is void from the first. It is wrong to make such a promise; to fulfil it is to add a second wrong. We can never bind ourselves by vow to do that which it would not be right for us to do without a vow.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>A. C. Hervey, The Pulpit Commentary, p. 130.

## CONCLUSION

Could Jephthah, recorded in Hebrews 11 as a hero of the faith, actually have offered his own daughter as a human sacrifice? Surely, as the daughter of a judge of Israel, she must have been dedicated to temple service for the remainder of her life. It is not easy for a believer living in the twentieth century western world to accept this incredulous idea of a human offering. Nevertheless, it is the determination of the writer that Jephthah pronounced a vow of human sacrifice to God in exchange for a military victory over the Ammonites. He promised the first person who would come out of his dwelling. Although Jephthah probably expected the first person to be a servant, it was his daughter. It is evident that Jephthah, in accordance with his vow, consummated his promise by actually offering his daughter as a burnt offering.

Even though ignorant of the law of Moses, Jephthah was morally guilty before God in both his suggestion of a human sacrifice and the fulfillment of his vow. After a review of historical and grammatical elements of the problem, there are several reasons which would indicate that Jephthah's vow and its ultimate fulfillment had negative moral implications.

First, there is the general historical context of the nation Israel which had once again emerged in repentance from the depths of

indulgence in the worship of the false gods of its surrounding neighbors. Then there was the man Jephthah, a military leader, who desired to serve the true God, but who came from many years of association with the pagans east of the Jordan and their gods.

Second, it was the universally acknowledged practice at that time among all the peoples of the Ancient Near East to make vows to their gods. Even more critical is the acceptance of vows by God and the divine legislation concerning their enactment. Thus, Jephthah's vow under the given circumstances exhibits the customary acceptable expression of concern by a servant of God at a critical juncture in time.

Third, the examination of several critical words and phrases significantly clarifies Jephthah's vow. The article and singular expression of the verbs in  $\chi \varsigma \iota \gamma \psi \chi \chi \varsigma \iota \gamma$  suggest that Jephthah intended to offer one object as completely adequate for the fulfillment of his vow. Further specification is provided by the phrase "to meet me" ( $\epsilon \gamma \chi \rho \iota \sigma \tau \epsilon$ ), which is always used with reference to a person. Upon his arrival at home from this crucial victory, Jephthah would not have expected anything but people to emerge from his house in celebration of his triumphant return. Finally, the primary understanding of  $\gamma \alpha \rho \tau \epsilon$  must be that of a burnt offering in which the object is wholly consumed by the fire. All of these insights taken as a whole point to Jephthah's intention to offer a human sacrifice that would be consumed as a literal burnt offering.

Fourth, Jephthah's inevitable familiarity with human sacrifice was based on his association with idolatry and its related practices.

Likewise, his extensive ignorance of God and His laws lead to the result that Jephthah was placed in the position of naturally assuming that in the most serious of crises situations only the highest of sacrifices would be acceptable as a thank offering, with the final selection left up to God.

Fifth, the final evaluation of Jephthah's vow and execution of it can only be seen as deplorable against an understanding of God's moral laws as universal absolutes originating from His very character. As a reflection of the sacredness of human life, God has decreed, "Thou shalt not murder; thou shalt not offer human sacrifices." With intentions reflecting ignorance of God's moral standards for His people, Jephthah grossly, but unknowingly, violated a serious commandment of God when his daughter was offered up as a burnt offering. The law allowed no sacrifice for such a sin, but rather required the penalty of death.

Thus, there is adequate evidence to justify that Jephthah in his vow to God did intend to offer a human sacrifice and did, in fact, offer his daughter as a burnt offering. For this unwillful violation of God's moral law, Jephthah stands condemned as guilty of dreadful sin.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bamberger, Bernard J. The Torah, A Modern Commentary, Leviticus. New York: The Union of America Hebrew Congregation, 1904.
- Boling, Robert G. The Anchor Bible, Judges. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975.
- Brown, Francis; Driver, S. R.; and Briggs, C. A., editors. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Bruce, F. F. "Judges," in The New Bible Commentary. Edited by F. Davidson. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954.
- Burney, C. F. The Book of Judges. New York: ETAV Publishing House, Inc., 1970.
- Bush, George. Notes Critical and Practical on the Book of Judges. New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1857.
- Bustanoby, A. "Sacrificing Jephthah's Daughter." Eternity 16:2 (February, 1965):17-18.
- Cave, Alfred. Scriptural Doctrine of Sacrifice. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1877.
- Compton, Berdmore. Sacrifice. London: J. Parker, 1896.
- Cook, F. C. The Holy Bible, Vol. 2. New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., n.d.
- Culver, R. D. "Did Jephthah Really Slay His Daughter and Offer Her Body as a Burnt Offering?" Evangelical Christian 55:2 (February, 1959):69:70.
- Cundall, Arthur E. and Morris, Leon. Judges-Ruth. Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968.
- Daly, Robert J. Christian Sacrifice: the Judaeo-Christian Background before Origen. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1978.
- Davidson, C. "Agememnon." The Early Greeks. London: Burrick and Sons, 1948.

- Davis Dictionary of the Bible. "Vows" by J. D. Davis. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975.
- Davis, John J. Conquest and Crisis, Studies in Joshua, Judges and Ruth. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1969.
- Epiphanius. Contra. Haeres, 1, 2. Basilae: 1544.
- Fletcher, Joseph. Situation Ethics. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966.
- Geisler, Norman L. Ethics: Alternatives and Issues. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971.
- Gesenius, Am. A Hebrew and English Lexocon of the Old Testament. Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1849.
- Girard, Rene. Violence and the Sacred. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Green, Albert Ravinell Whitney. The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975.
- Hervey, A. C. The Pulpit Commentary, Judges. Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Co., n.d.
- Horvath, Tibor. The Sacrificial Interpretation of Jesus' Achievement in the New Testament: Historical Development and Its Reasons. New York: Philosophical Library, 1979.
- Hunter, John E. Judges and a Permissive Society. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975.
- The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. "Sacrifice and Offering OT" by T. H. Gaster. George Arthur Buttrick, editor. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.
- The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. "Vows" by G. Henton Davies. George Arthur Buttrick, editor. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.
- The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. "Vow" by Paul Lavertoff, James Orr, editor. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939.
- The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. "Topheth" by E. W. Masterman. James Orr, editor. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939.
- The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. "Human Sacrifice" by Wm. J. McGlothlin. James Orr, editor. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939.

- The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. "Sacrifice" by J. J. Reeve. James Orr, editor. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939.
- Josephus, Josephus' Complete Works. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960.
- Keil, C. F. and Delitzsch, F. Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Joshua, Judges, Ruth. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970.
- Kravitz, David. Who's Who in Greek and Roman Mythology. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1975.
- Kurtz, Johann H. Sacrificial Worship of the Old Testament. Translated by James Martin. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980.
- Landes, G. M. "The Material Civilization of the Ammonites." The Biblical Archaeologist Reader II. D. N. Freedman and E. F. Campbell, Jr., editors. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964.
- Lange, John Peter. Commentary on the Holy Scriptures. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915.
- Lutzer, Erwin. The Morality Gap. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981.
- Macalister, R. A. S. Excavations at Gezer, Vol. 2 (1907-1909). Published for the Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund. London: John Murray, 1912.
- McKenzie, John L. The World of the Judges. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965.
- Murphey, G. James. Book of Leviticus. Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1874.
- The New Bible Dictionary. "Jephthah" by John Rea. J. D. Douglas, editor. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962.
- Parker, Joseph. The People's Bible. Vol. 6. London and Toronto: Funk and Wagnalls Company, n.d.
- Payne, J. Barton. The Theology of the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962.
- Pictorial Biblical Encyclopedia. "Sacrifice and Offering" by Gaalyahu Cornfield. Tel Aviv: Hamikra Baalam Publishing House, Ltd., 1964.
- Pictorial Biblical Encyclopedia. "Canaan, Gods and Idols, Cult" by Gaalyahu Cornfield. Tel Aviv: Hamikra Baalam Publishing House, Ltd., 1964.

- Plutarch. "De Fluviis." The Complete Writings of Plutarch. New York: Colonial Company, 1906.
- Rushdoony, Rousas John. The Institutes of Biblical Law. New York: Craig Press, 1973.
- Sales, R. H. "Human Sacrifice in Biblical Thought." Journal of Bible and Religion 25:2 (April, 1957):112-117.
- Smith, Morton. "A Note on Burning Babies." Journal of the American Oriental Society 95:3 (1975):479.
- Strack, Herman L. The Jew and Human Sacrifice (Human Blood and the Jewish Ritual). London: Cope and Fenwick, 1909.
- Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. Vol. 2. "  $\text{נֶזֶק}$  " by G. Lloyd Carr, R. Laird Harris, editor. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.
- Tregelles, Samuel Prideaux. Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scripture. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949.
- Trible, Phyllis. "A Meditation in Mourning: The Sacrifice of the Daughter of Jephthah." Union Seminary Quarterly Review 36:4 (Supplementary Issue, 1981):59-68.
- Turnball, H. Clay. The Blood Covenant, a Primitive Rite and Its Bearings on Scripture. Philadelphia: John D. Wattles and Co., 1898.
- Unger's Bible Dictionary. "Vow." Merrill F. Unger, editor. Chicago: Moody Press, 1957.
- Vaux, Roland de. Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964.
- Warren, Samuel. "Jephthah's Vow." Bibliotheca Sacra. 24:94 (April, 1867):238-249.
- Watson, Robert A. The Expositor's Bible, Judges-Ruth-Chronicles. New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1903.
- Weaver, Scott L. "How Did Jephthah Fulfill His Vow? A Critical Examination of Judges 11:30-40." Unpublished M. Div. Thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1953.
- Williams, Ronald J. Hebrew Syntax: An Outline. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967.
- Wood, Leon. A Survey of Israel's History. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970.

Yerkes, Royden Keith. Sacrifice in Greek and Roman Religions and Early Judaism. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.