

THE VOW OF JEPHTHAH

by

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Judges 11:29-40 describes the traumatic experience of Jephthah, a judge in Israel. It is a passage that describes the victorious battle the Lord had given him over the Ammonites but also it tells of a rash vow he had made to assure the victory. That vow is expressed in verse 31 of this passage. It is a vow to offer to the Lord as a burnt offering whatever comes from his house first upon returning from battle. The sad account follows of his daughter running to meet him in celebration of her father's victory. Verse 39 remarks that Jephthah did according to his vow. Scholars however disagree as to the intent of his vow and exactly how it was to be fulfilled.

The clear wording of Scripture certainly implies that Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter. The time of the Judges was a time of spiritual apostasy. Jephthah, though a judge of Israel, spent much time on the east of Jordan where paganistic practices were common. This supports the fact that Jephthah did kill his own daughter. The grammar and syntax add evidence along with parallels found in the Bible as well as Ugaritic and classical sources. The LXX, Talmud, Josephus and all Jewish and Christian interpreters before 1200 A.D. concur with this interpretation.

It was not until 1200 A.D., that an alternative view was suggested by one Jewish source. This became acceptable and favored by many who studied the Bible. This view is supported by weak exegesis and faulty characterization of Jephthah. The purpose seems to be to soften the bad and tragic days of this dark chapter in Israel's history.

Jephthah should not be looked upon as one who could do no wrong but as a deliverer who found himself in a real world being swayed and affected by the society and culture he found himself in. Jephthah, even though he was used by the Lord to deliver the children of Israel, did perpetrate this tragic deed.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of individual characters in the Bible is always an interesting study. The Bible lays bare the facts of men's lives whether they be bad or good. Unlike some contemporary biographies no attempt is made to make individuals look better than they are. Thus, we have men like Moses who was Israel's deliverer chosen by God committing murder and David, a man after God's own heart guilty of murder and adultery.

It is evident throughout the Bible that God uses men for His own purpose in spite of themselves. This is no more true than in the book of Judges. It was a time when every man did what was right in his own eyes. It is not surprising then that some of the judges have a less than shining reputation. Certainly this could be said of Samson. Yet it has been the practice of some to glamorize the characters of Scripture, thinking that they could do no wrong. This is that human tendency to make perfect heroes out of men that God happened to use for His purpose.

The man under investigation in this paper is Jephthah, a judge of Israel. He was a man upon whom the Spirit of God came and who was used by God. However, as shall be brought out in this paper, there were flaws in his conduct.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the vow of Jephthah contained in Judges 11:29-40 and the manner by which it was carried out. This passage is certainly one of the more difficult passages to understand in Scripture. It has been a passage that has been greatly discussed and debated.

By the very nature of the passage one must ask a number of questions. What did Jephthah mean by his vow? Did he murder his own daughter? What is the character of Jephthah? What actually happened to Jephthah's daughter?

These are only a few questions that must be asked as one enters into this discussion. It is hoped that through this research these questions and others may be answered so that a conclusion may be made on the basis of the biblical data.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The years of the judges were certainly dark years for Israel. It is during this period (1382-1063 B.C.) that the nation struggles both religiously and militarily as it attempts to settle in the land. Their struggles are a result of their spiritual apostasy as they forsake the Lord time and time again. The tenor of the whole book is summed up in Judges 21:25 where it reads: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." What a contrast this is from the book of Joshua where God assures success if the nation faithfully obeys God's law (cf. Josh 1:8).

As the book of Judges opens, Israel is found without a leader because Joshua has died. This is a problem, for even though the initial conquest has been made "very much of the land remains to be possessed" (Josh 13:1). This leads them to ask the question in Judges 1:1, "Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites?" Without Joshua on the scene there arose a generation in Israel who had not witnessed all the great and mighty miracles that God had done for them. Also they started worshipping the gods of the people around them (Judg 2:10-11).

This leads to an interesting cycle that appears again and again in this book. The Lord would raise up judges to lead the people in victory. However, they would not listen to the judge and they rebelled against God. In turn God withdrew His protection and delivered them into the hands of one of their foreign oppressors. Then the Israelites repented of their sin and cried out to God for help. God would respond by delivering up a judge to defeat the oppressor. This cycle is described in Judges 2:16-19.

The cycle repeats itself in Judges 10:6,7 where it states:

Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him. And the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the sons of Ammon.

The Jews once again succumbed to serving idol gods. God had to judge them and He delivered them into the hands of the Ammonites. The Israelites then cry out to the Lord in repentance.

It is at this point that Jephthah enters the story. Jephthah was from a rather strange background. He was the son of a Gileadite named Gilead (cf. Judg 11:1; probably from the ancestor, Gilead, grandson of Manasseh found in Num 26:29). He was also the son of a harlot which meant that Jephthah was an illegitimate son in his family.¹

¹Leon Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), pp. 278-87.

Gilead's younger legitimate sons had driven their older half-brother from home because of his illegitimacy. Jephthah fled north to a place called Tob (Judg 11:2-3). From there he and the "worthless fellows" whom he had gathered around him raided settlements and caravans and, like David's followers (1 Sam 22:2; 27:8-9), may have protected Israelite villages from invading tribes, perhaps even the Ammonites.¹

Therefore, when Ammon now invaded the land, the elders of Jephthah's home territory found him and asked him to return and lead them against this enemy (Judg 11:4-8). They were not concerned about his background or morality. He agreed, but only upon their promise that he could continue as leader after Ammon had been defeated and be assured that he would not be driven out of the land again (Judg 11:9-11).

Jephthah first tried to make a settlement with the Ammonite king by negotiation but did not succeed. The king would not accept Jephthah's argument that the land now rightfully belonged to Israel since she had held it for three hundred years (Judg 11:12-28).

After the Spirit of God came upon Jephthah, he passed through Gilead and Manasseh to raise additional troops. He then passed over the Jabbok to the Israelite headquarters at Mizpeh. Eager for divine approval as he

¹The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Jephthah," by J. Rea.

entered battle Jephthah vowed that, if he were victorious, he would offer to God whatever came first from his house to meet him on returning home. Verse 32 records that the Lord gave Jephthah the victory over the Ammonites.

Upon returning home from battle, the first to come out to meet Jephthah was his daughter and only child. After the daughter laments for two months because of her virginity, verse 39 states that Jephthah "did to her according to the vow which he had made."¹ It is here that the interpretive problem becomes apparent.

There are two general ways in which this passage can be interpreted. There are those who state that Jephthah did not actually kill his daughter and those who say that Jephthah did kill his daughter. For lack of better terminology these will be called the Non-Sacrifice Interpretation and the Human Sacrifice Interpretation.

¹For additional historical background see John Bright, A History of Israel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 173-82; and also Martin Noth, The History of Israel (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 101-4.

CHAPTER II

THE NON-SACRIFICE INTERPRETATION

This view holds that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter. Most see this as an incident that surely could not have happened as the Scriptural account seems to imply. This is a very popular interpretation by many commentators today and there are a number of arguments that they use to support this conclusion.

The Character of Jephthah

It is argued that the very character of Jephthah is evidence that he did not carry out such a terrible deed. Edersheim claims that there are "few finer or nobler characters"¹ that are described in Scripture than this man. Leon Wood says that certainly here is a man who had respect for God and His will, since he made a vow "to the Lord" which no other judge had done.² Simpson takes this one step further saying that Jephthah is a picture "not only of the loftiest faith, but the sublimest faithfulness."³

¹Alfred Edersheim, Old Testament Bible History (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), p. 156.

²Wood, Days of the Judges, p. 289.

³A. B. Simpson, Judges, Ruth and Samuel (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, Inc., n.d.), p. 108.

Others say that at this time, Jephthah was undoubtedly a pious man because in verse 29 it says, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah." It is assumed that a man under such an influence could not deliberately vow to God that he would commit murder whether it be a man or woman or even his very own daughter.¹

Also Jephthah's name is recorded in Hebrews 11:32 among the heroes of faith. Supporters of this view claim that it is impossible to believe that one like this could have either vowed or actually offered a human sacrifice. No one guilty of such a crime could have found a place among the heroes of faith.²

Human Sacrifice was Contrary to Israelite Law

For Jephthah to have offered his daughter as a human sacrifice would have been contrary both to Mosaic Law (Lev 18:21) and Israelite practice. Human sacrifice was always understood from the days of Abraham to be an offense and an abomination to the Lord. The Israelites were clearly forbidden to act like the nations of Canaan in sacrificing their sons and daughters by fire (Deut 12:29-31). Also Israelite practice required burnt offerings in which the victim was slaughtered and burnt upon the altar could only be offered upon the lawful altar at the tabernacle, or

¹George Bush, Judges (New York: Ivison and Phinney, 1844), pp. 150-51; Alfred Edersheim, Israel in Canaan (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), pp. 159-60.

²Ibid.

before the ark, through the agency of a Levite priest. In addition, only a male victim could have been offered.¹

Also, Archer claims that there is no evidence that any Israelite ever offered human sacrifice prior to the days of Ahaz (743-728 B.C.).²

Therefore, it is said that if Jephthah had been an idolater he might have offered his daughter in any of the high places to a false god yet, it is argued that he was not an idolater because he seemed to be acquainted with the book of Moses because of the message he sent to the king of Ammon in verses 15ff.³

The Intent of the Vow

There is some variation by interpreters who support the view that Jephthah did not literally sacrifice his daughter as to the exact intent of his vow. Who or what did Jephthah expect to meet when he returned home?

Jephthah Expected an Animal

Attempts have been made to show that Jephthah had an animal sacrifice in mind such as a dog, sheep or even cattle. Boling points out that houses during this time

¹C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, vol. 2, trans. James Martin in Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., reprinted 1975), p. 393.

²Gleason Archer, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), p. 279.

³Leon Wood, A Survey of Israel's History (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 223.

were built "to accommodate the livestock as well as the family."¹ Therefore, he was taken by surprise when his daughter came to meet him. The vow was then proclaimed invalid and an animal sacrificed in her place.

Jephthah Expected Either a Human or An Animal

Some interpreters claim that the language of Jephthah's vow implied the possibility of some human being coming out from the door but also the possibility of an animal.

The relative pronoun **אשר** may be translated; who, which or that. Jephthah's language seems to have been chosen in general terms to cover all cases.²

It was Rabbi David Kimchi who lived in the twelfth century who used this ambiguity to suggest that Jephthah did not kill his daughter. His argument hinges on whether the **ו** is translated conjunctively, copulatively or disjunctively, i.e. and, or, but. Kimchi translates it copulatively as, . . . "it shall be the Lord's or I will offer it up as a burnt offering." Thus Jephthah would fulfill his vow depending on what would meet him, human or animal. "It shall be the Lord's" if it is something which cannot be offered on the altar, and then it shall be dedicated to God; or of it is something that can be a sacrifice, "I will

¹Robert G. Boling, Judges, AB (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1975), p. 208.

²Keil and Delitzsch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, p. 289.

offer it up."¹

Through the years others have concurred with this interpretation claiming this view on the basis of the context of the passage or the character of Jephthah.²

Wood explains that Jephthah had the words of Leviticus 27 in mind where it states what should be done for animals, persons, houses and land that is set apart for God. He says that all these items can be set apart for the Lord in its particular manner. Therefore, willing to make a major vow, Wood claims that Jephthah will devote to the Lord anything that comes out to meet him first, in keeping with Leviticus 27. If it is a suitable offering it would be sacrificed, if not it would be sold. If it would be a person, it would be redeemed for an appropriate price or in the case of a woman she would be dedicated to permanent tabernacle service.³

Jephthah Expected a Human

Keil and Delitzsch claim that verse 30 cannot apply to a herd or a flock driven out at the time when Jephthah returned or any other animal that would run out to meet him. יֵצֵא לִקְרָאתִי only applies to humans in other passages where it occurs. Jephthah wanted to make a difficult vow.

¹Judah J. Slotki, Judges, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino Press, 1950), p. 257.

²Xenophon Betts, "Jephthah's Vow," Biblical Repository 9 (1843):144; Samuel Warren, "Jephthah's Vow," BSac 24 (April 1867):241.

³Wood, Days of the Judges, pp. 292-94.

That would not have been the case if he had been thinking of a sacrificial animal for it is argued that he would have made many sacrifices anyway after having obtained victory.¹

It is concluded then that Jephthah would dedicate to the Lord whoever came out to meet him. The choice of that sacrifice was left to God. They say he may have expected a servant thus explaining the grief and surprise when his daughter appears.²

Public Opposition

Wood suggests that if Jephthah would have attempted to sacrifice his daughter in the land, he would have faced resistance from other Israelites because of its violation of the law. Also it is stated that this would not have been permitted by the levitical priests. Wood also claims that Jephthah would have faced opposition in his home country.³

1 Samuel 14:39-45 is cited as a similar account when the public opinion of Saul's soldiers would not let him take the life of his son Jonathan. Also Wood doubts if Jephthah would have continued as judge for six years if he had committed such an act as this.⁴

¹Keil and Delitzsch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, pp. 385-86.

²Ibid.

³Wood, Days of the Judges, p. 290.

⁴Ibid.

The Daughter's Action

Jephthah's daughter was allowed two months of mourning not to bewail her death but her perpetual virginity. If Jephthah's daughter had devoted herself to death, it is claimed that it is unbelievable that she would have wished to spend the last two months of her life bewailing her virginity and not with her broken-hearted father.¹

Edersheim argues that she bewails not her "maiden age," but her "maiden hood." He makes the distinction, not that she dies so young, but that eventually she will die unmarried. For the only child to die unmarried with no children to perpetuate one's name was viewed as a very bitter judgment. This is especially true, Edersheim remarks, when this command comes from the lips of her very own father. This argument is used to explain Jephthah's excessive grief.²

The Fulfillment of the Vow

Of those who hold the non-sacrificial view of interpretation there are two ways by which verse 39 is explained when it is stated that Jephthah "did to her according to the vow which he had made."

Jephthah Redeemed His Vow with Money

According to this view, during the two month absence of his daughter, Jephthah had become better

¹Archer, Old Testament Introduction, p. 279.

²Edersheim, Old Testament History, p. 161.

instructed in the law of Moses and realized that he had made a mistake. This view assumes that Jephthah did originally intend a human sacrifice but that after being instructed he did not actually sacrifice his daughter. The Levitical law (Lev 27:2-13) permitted him to redeem a vow to sacrifice a daughter by the payment of a small sum of money (for the life of his only child). The amount required would be ten to thirty shekels depending on her age.¹

Jephthah Dedicated Her to Temple Service

This view claims that Jephthah did not slay his daughter, but dedicated her to the Lord for life-long temple service. Particular emphasis is placed upon the fact that after Jephthah performed the vow it states in verse 39 that, "she knew no man." Archer claims "this would be pointless if she had been put to death. But it has perfect relevance if she was devoted to the service of Jehovah at the door of the tabernacle the rest of her life."²

Keil argues that "to mourn one's virginity does not mean to mourn because one has to die a virgin, but because one has to live and remain a virgin."³ Further he states that נָזַף does not involve the idea of burning like our

¹Ralph W. Scott, A New Look at Biblical Crime (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), p. 13.

²Archer, Old Testament Introduction, p. 279.

³Keil and Delitzsch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, p. 392.

word burnt offering, but simply that of going up upon the altar, or of complete surrender to the Lord. Therefore, this must be viewed as a spiritual sacrifice according to Keil. When Jephthah's daughter was set apart as a spiritual sacrifice it meant that she belonged completely to the Lord to remain a virgin for the rest of her life.¹

Wood suggests that such temple service did exist. One passage for this view is 1 Samuel 2:22 where there were women who gave their lives to serving the Lord in the tabernacle at Shiloh. He suggests that these women performed such tasks as cooking meals, making and mending garments, washing clothes, and keeping the general area clean.²

Argument is made on the expression "to lament" in verse 40. Bush suggests that the word should be translated "to talk to, to praise, to commemorate," indicating that the daughter remained alive. It is said that the daughters of Israel kept a few days' anniversary to remember this incident and actually went "to talk to" Jephthah's daughter annually.³

An Argument From Silence

It is argued that the passage does not expressly state she was offered up for a burnt offering. Instead, the writer simply records, "He did to her his vow, and she

¹Ibid., p. 395.

²Wood, Days of the Judges, p. 288.

³Bush, Judges, p. 166.

knew no man." Bush takes this as an explanation of the manner in which the vow was accomplished, viz. by devoting her to a life of celibacy. He thinks it is strange if death were involved, that the fact of her death would not be spoken of immediately.¹

¹Ibid., pp. 162-63.

CHAPTER III

THE HUMAN SACRIFICE INTERPRETATION

This view holds that Jephthah did actually offer his daughter as a human sacrifice. The author of this work accepts this interpretation and feels it explains the present passage best because of the following reasons.

The Times of the Judges

It is very crucial to have a proper understanding of the times of the judges as one seeks an interpretation of Judges 11:29-40. No longer is the spiritual condition the same as in the book of Joshua which was characterized by victory, where Israel accomplished great things because of their consistent trust in the Lord and faithful obedience to the law. The principal theme of Judges is failure because of Israel's compromise. It was a time of spiritual apostasy and moral relativism throughout the land. Judges 17:6 certainly sums up the moral and spiritual condition of Israel as well as all men when it states, "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Each tribe thought primarily of its own interest while the general welfare of the nation was more and more forgotten. Jealousy and internal discord

were so threatening that there is serious question whether the nation would continue to exist in the land. The nation gradually incorporated elements of Baal worship into their service to God, even adopting some of the extremely wicked practices that brought judgment on the Canaanites. As a result, God let Israel suffer a series of defeats and periods of oppression by some of the very nations they should have conquered. The Book of Judges is far from the success story in Joshua's time. Rather it is a time of tragic judgment upon a people who failed to faithfully obey their God and who in turn absorbed the pagan practices of their surrounding culture.¹

The Lord during this time raised up judges (שופטים), of which Jephthah was one, to lead and deliver Israel from their foes. The judge was to stand with the high priest as the supreme judge or leader in Israel. The responsibilities of this position included civil service activities but also many times military and religious affairs were included. The function of the judges became more a role of deliverer from foreign oppression than anything else.²

The Character of Jephthah

Having looked at the time of the judges, one must ask what the character of these judges was generally and

¹John L. McKenzie, The World of the Judges (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 34-35.

²John J. Davis, Conquest and Crisis (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1969), p. 93.

what was Jephthah like specifically? Were the judges such as Jephthah completely unaffected by the conditions of the time? The evidence will show that Jephthah, as well as other judges of this time, did not live in a vacuum but were men of their times. It seems at times Christians feel they must justify the actions of some men in the Bible or somehow find an excuse that their character might be exonerated. This cannot be done in the Book of Judges or any place else where there is found a flaw in one of God's servants.

G. W. Anderson concedes that the "bloodthirsty stories" in Judges may present a problem to the modern reader, but he states there is no need to pretend that the judges of Israel "were any better than they are, in fact, made out to be."¹ These deeds were characteristic of the times they lived in. With all their flaws, the judges were not remembered only for their military prowess but above all as agents of God.

But the objection is raised, did not the Spirit of the Lord come upon these judges and does this not guarantee their moral purity? The judges were charismatic leaders, meaning that they were raised up to be Israel's deliverer by a special endowment of the Spirit of God. J. Barton Payne points out that the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, and in particular in the Book of Judges, had a periodic

¹G. W. Anderson, Studies in Theology: A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament (London: Garden City Press, 1974), p. 70.

rather than a permanent nature. The Spirit would especially empower a man for a particular job to deliver Israel from their oppression. This did not necessarily include a total transformation of character.¹

The Spirit of the Lord also came upon Samson, another judge of Israel, and surely he was not above reproach but yielded to the moral relativism of the time and succumbed to his own lust. Another striking example of the Spirit of the Lord coming upon a man is Balaam in Numbers 24:2. Balaam who was a false prophet and heathen diviner tried to have God's chosen people cursed. There is real doubt whether he is a believer and yet the Spirit of God came upon him to use him for a particular purpose. Thus, in Numbers 24 God speaks through Balaam as His agent even though throughout the rest of the Bible Balaam's name is always associated with great wickedness (see 2 Pet 2:15; Rev 2:14).

If other characters outside the Book of Judges are examined, there are many whom God used for a particular purpose and yet at times they fell terribly short of God's holy standard. For example, there is David, a man after God's own heart. Here was a man who committed adultery and murder. Moses, the leader of the exodus was guilty of murder. Rahab exhibited tremendous faith by hiding the spies and yet she lied. All of these persons are considered

¹J. Barton Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 175.

great in faith and appear along with Jephthah in Hebrews 11. This points out once again that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). "The heart is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick" (Jer 17:9). The Bible points out again and again that God does not use men because of who they are but God out of His grace uses them in spite of themselves.

Now Jephthah to be sure came from a very questionable background. He was an illegitimate son of an unnamed prostitute. His brothers who were born in wedlock drove him away from home refusing him any share in the inheritance. Settling in the land of Tob, in time, this outcast attracts friends from the dregs of society called "worthless fellows." John Bright says of Jephthah that he was no better than a bandit thief "who knew how to strike a canny bargain."¹ Add to this that Jephthah was living among heathens who offered human sacrifices to pagan deities (cf. 2 Kgs 3:27) and in a day when the law of Moses was little known or practiced, it is clear that Jephthah would have been ignorant of much of the law. It is evident from this account that Jephthah was a follower of Yahweh, however, he is obviously confused as to the exact requirements of Yahweh.

In any event, even though Jephthah did have some knowledge of God's law and acted in faith at times in his

¹Bright, History of Israel, p. 178.

life, that would by no means guarantee that he would not violate the law even in this terrible fashion. Therefore, the fact that Jephthah is a judge and the Spirit came upon him and his name appears in Hebrews 11 is no proof that he could not or did not commit this sin.

The Vow of Judges 11

Much of the disagreement concerning this passage centers around the vow Jephthah made in verses 30-31. It will be helpful in this discussion to consider this closely.

The Nature of a Vow in the Old Testament

Jephthah made a vow to offer as a burnt offering the first thing that comes out to meet him; but what exactly did that mean?

In the Old Testament, a vow (נדר) is a promise to give or to dedicate to God a person or thing, e.g. a tithe (Gen 28:20-22), animals (2 Sam 15:8), plunder taken in war (Num 21:2), a person (1 Sam 1:11). In all these instances, the vow was a conditional promise to give something to God, if God first granted a favor. For example, Jacob promised to pay a tithe if God brought him home safely; Hannah promised to dedicate her child to God if He would grant her a son. Similarly, Jephthah promised to sacrifice someone if he won a victory.¹

¹Roland de Vaux, "Religious Institutions," in vol. 2 of Ancient Israel, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1965), p. 465.

Vows are always voluntary. It is no sin to vow or not to vow but once the vow was made it was presumed to be as sacred as an oath (Deut 23:21-23). They were felt to be binding as Ecclesiastes 5:3-5 points out.

A person could vow himself to service, or be vowed to service, and subsequently be redeemed thus giving to God a value equal in worth to his actual service, but being free to pursue his own life (Lev 27:2ff). However, as will be pointed out below, this is an option that either Jephthah did not consider or was ignorant of.

Pederson, in comparing a votive offering (זָבַח) which necessitated a vow and the free-will offering (זָבַח חֵלֶב), points out that both are offered of one's own accord so that a votive offering may in a sense also be called a free-will offering. The only difference is that the worshipper making a votive offering has made a conditional promise to God before the blessing is given to him. "This gives an important shade of variation to the votive offering for by his vow the worshipper tries to influence the course of events and call forth the object of his wish."¹ The purpose of these vows was to add force to a prayer by making a kind of contract with God. All the vows in the Old Testament seem to have been of this kind even when the condition was not openly expressed.

¹Johs. Pederson, Israel: its life and culture, 4 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 4:323-26.

The Nature of a Vow Outside the Old Testament

Vowing was not limited to Israel. There are numerous accounts that are nearly parallel to the story in Judges 11.

The Ugaritic Keret Epic is a good example. The story opens with a description of a hero-king with little hope for the future because his seven wives have died before they could bear any children. Later in the story Keret, in response to instructions from El received in a dream, restores his position by invading a neighboring kingdom and taking the daughter of its king in marriage so that he might have children. While on his journey to take that daughter, on the third day, the army comes to a shrine at which Keret vows that if he obtains Huray (the daughter of the opposing king) he will devote several times her weight in gold and silver to the local goddess.¹

The importance of this parallel is illustrated by Loren R. Fisher who indicates that the vows in Judges 11 and the Ugaritic Keret Epic are parallel in structure. He shows that vows of this time were composed in a literary genre consisting of an Introductory Formula, the God, the condition and the Vow or Gift.² The two could be divided as follows:

¹J. C. L. Gibson, Canaanite Myths and Legends (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., 1977), pp. 20 and 23.

²Loren R. Fisher, "Literary Genres in Ugaritic Texts," in vol. 2 of Ras Shamra Parallels (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1975), pp. 147-51.

Judges 11:30,31

Keret: 199-206

Introductory Formula

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. And Jephthah made a
vow | 1. There Keret of Tha'
vows a gift |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|

The God

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 2. to Yahweh | 2. O, Asherah of the
Tyrians, even the
goddess of the Si-
donians |
|--------------|--|

The Condition

- | | |
|---|---|
| 3. If you will give the
Ammonites into my hand | 3. If Hurrai into my
house I take, I
cause the girl to
enter my court, |
|---|---|

The Vow or Gift

- | | |
|---|---|
| 4. then whoever will be
the one who comes out
of the doors of my
house to meet me when
I return in peace from
the Ammonites, he will
be Yahweh's and I will
offer him up as a burnt
offering. | 4. twice her (weight)
in silver I will
give, even thrice
her (weight) in
gold. ¹ |
|---|---|

Besides the above accounts there are other strikingly similar accounts found later in Greek literature. In the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia at Aulis, the theme of Euripides' tragedy of the same name, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to a god who is responsible for the demand.² There is also the Cretan tale of Idomenaeus, king of Crete, caught up in a storm. At the point of being shipwrecked he makes a vow to offer up to Neptune the first

¹Ibid.

²Euripides, "Iphigenia in Aulis," trans. Charles R. Walker, vol. 4 of The Complete Greek Tragedies, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 311-12.

being who comes out to meet him on his return home. This turned out to be his own son.¹

Therefore, from these accounts the fact is clear that vowing was not unique to Israel. Vows were made to appease or persuade a god for some particular favor.

The Intent of Jephthah

As can be discovered by this study, a vow was a kind of bargaining with deity to assure success. In its purest form it showed devotion to God but in its vilest form it was an attempt to force the hand of God. Therefore, to say that Jephthah expected an animal to come out to meet him would seem quite ridiculous. What kind of vow would it be for a great military general who has proven to be a mighty warrior to say, "If you give me this victory, I will sacrifice the first dog that comes out of my house." This would be strange and unexpected.

Jephthah left God, as it were, to choose His own victim. He probably expected it to be some slave. But it is clear, it seems, that Jephthah was here promising a human. The idea of this vow is that Jephthah wanted to bind God to do something great for him and thus, he must give him something great in return.²

It seems that the making of this vow was in reality

¹Virgil, "Aeneid," in Virgil's Works, trans. J. W. MacKail (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), pp. iii, 121; xi, 264.

²Pedersen, Israel, p. 326.

an act of unfaithfulness. Even though the Spirit of the Lord had come upon him, he was still not convinced that God had given him the victory so he felt somehow that he must manipulate the circumstances. Thus, out of doubt and lack of courage Jephthah makes this tragic vow in view of what he thought was an undefeatable foe.¹

The sad story unfolds with Jephthah's daughter running out to meet him. His great grief is the result of the identity of the victim (his only child) not the kind of victim. Verse 39 records that he did to her according to his vow. Possibly, because of his limited knowledge of the law, Jephthah felt absolutely bound to carry out the vow. Scripture does not record that he sought any other option such as forgiveness before God or redemption of the vow. He instead carried out faithfully an unfaithful vow which he had made.

The Practice of Human Sacrifice

Having looked at the nature of vowing and the intent of Jephthah's vow, it would seem appropriate to determine whether human sacrifice is involved in this passage and, if so, is there any evidence of its practice in the Ancient Near East?

¹Phyllis Tribble, "A Meditation in Mourning," USQR 36 (Supplementary 1981):60-61.

The Offering of Jephthah's Vow

Assuming then it is a human that Jephthah met on his return home, what was he going to do with the one he met? Verse 31 records that in return for a victory over the Ammonites, he was willing to give this one up for a burnt offering (עֹלָה).

Proponents of the non-sacrificial view argue that the root of עֹלָה simply means "to go up" and the words themselves do not connote the idea of death. "They speak only of something being given up to God."¹ It is claimed that Jephthah would dedicate up to God anything that would come out to meet him in a manner set forth in Leviticus 27.

It is conceded that עָלָה means "to go up, ascend, climb." However, the Hebrew word עֹלָה always has the idea of a burnt sacrifice in the Old Testament. It is never used in its general root meaning of simply "going up" as some imply. It is always used in its specific meaning.² BDB calls it a whole burnt offering which is "entirely consumed and goes up in the flame of the altar of God."³ Its unique feature is that the entire victim is carried and laid on the altar without any part being given back to the offerer or priest and then the victim was wholly or

¹Wood, Days of the Judges, p. 294.

²Davis, Conquest and Crisis, p. 127.

³BDB, p. 750.

completely burned.¹

The burnt offerings were by far the most frequent sacrifices offered. There are three particular meanings that could accompany the offering of a burnt sacrifice. It could be sacrificed as: 1) a gift to a god, or 2) an expression of surrender or communion with God, or 3) a means of propitiation or expiation.² In addition, an עֲלֹהָ could accompany petitions for God's intervention in a time of need as the whole nation did in Judges 21:4 and Jeremiah 14:12.³

Jephthah was promising a gift to God but this accompanied a request for God's intervention to assure a victory. So Jephthah vowed a burnt offering. Therefore, since a human came out to meet him, if he was going to fulfill this vow as a real burnt offering, then a human sacrifice must necessarily be involved.⁴

Contemporary Accounts of Human Sacrifice

If it can be proven that human sacrifice was practiced outside Israel, as well as in Israel, we may then

¹Roland de Vaux, Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), p. 27.

²Robert J. Daly, Christian Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background Before Origen, The Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity, ed. Johannes Quasten (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1978), p. 42.

³Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, s.v. "עֲלֹהָ," by Carl Schultz.

⁴Norman H. Snaith, "Sacrifices in the Old Testament," VT 7 (July 1957):309.

conclude that human sacrifice is certainly in the realm of possibility in Judges 11.

Human sacrifice outside Israel

Examples of human sacrifice outside of Israel have already been given in the discussion of vows. However, these examples are fictional stories which only prove that this kind of vowing was familiar in form to ancient Near Eastern peoples. There is historical evidence that human sacrifice actually did take place outside of Israel.

Egypt at different periods and for different reasons, practiced ritualistic killings and human sacrifice. At the coronation of an Eighteenth Dynasty (1580-1314) king members of foreign conquered nobility were sacrificed. During the New Kingdom (1580-1085), and the Nineteenth Dynasty (1314-1194), there is evidence of foreigners being sacrificed on an altar to an Egyptian deity.¹

There is evidence that human sacrifice was engaged in around the Mesopotamian region. Early Assyrian sources indicate that an adult substitute for the king was allowed to be killed to protect the king in times of emergencies.²

Human sacrifice was practiced by many of the neighboring nations at this time. For example, the Canaanites who offered human sacrifices, considered it a means of

¹ Alberto R. W. Green, The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 197-98.

² Ibid., p. 193.

communication with deity.¹

The Phoenicians practiced child sacrifice. At times of great anxiety and danger, children were sacrificed by their parents as the greatest and most costly offering which they could make to appease the anger of the gods and thus secure their favor and help.² This sounds strikingly similar to what Jephthah did in Judges 11. In fact, the god who was most frequently worshipped in this way was Moloch, the god of the Ammonites (the very people Jephthah was to defeat).

A striking example of this rite was practiced by Israel's immediate neighbors, the Moabites, in 2 Kings 3:27. Here the king of Moab is under attack in his capital by the Israelites and apparently ready to suffer defeat. Mesha offers his eldest son as a burnt offering upon the wall of Kir-hareseth. The Israelites terrified by this sight return to their own land.³

Human sacrifice in Israel

Israel did not stand unaffected by the surrounding nations. There is evidence to suggest that Israel too practiced human sacrifice. The Israelites are said to have borrowed it from their Canaanite neighbors (2 Kgs 16:3;

¹De Vaux, Old Testament Sacrifices, p. 62.

²International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v. "Sacrifice, Human," by William J. McGlothlin.

³Mesha offers his son to Chemosh, the god of Moab, and a god that Jephthah seems to acknowledge in Judges 11:24.

2 Chr 28:3). There are statements which make it clear that the custom was widespread among the masses of people such as in Psalm 106:37f and 2 Kings 17:17.

There are specific cases of human sacrifice mentioned among the Israelites. Ahaz and Manasseh, the two kings of Judah who were most deeply affected by the surrounding heathen practices, sacrifice their sons by "passing them through the fire" (2 Kgs 16:3; 2 Chr 28:3; 2 Kgs 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6).

Another earlier example is the account of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. Here Abraham attempts to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering, as was the custom of his neighbors. It tested the strength of Abraham's devotion to God and taught that God does not desire a human sacrifice and an animal will do.¹

Realizing the tremendous amount of religious syncretism that takes place in the Book of Judges (Judg 10:6, 7) what can be concluded from this discussion? Human sacrifice was not only known of, but practiced in all the surrounding nations around Israel. Also this was practiced in the land by the Canaanites and even at times by the nation itself. Jephthah who lived on the east side of Jordan was very familiar with this practice. Coupled with his likely ignorance of the law, human sacrifice does not only

¹C. F. Burney, The Book of Judges and Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Kings, The Library of Biblical Studies, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1970), pp. 330-31.

become a possibility in Judges 11 but a probability. Jephthah was under the pressure of providing deliverance for Israel. He wanted desperately to communicate to his God. He had likely seen pagans in similar positions make similar vows and human sacrifices to appease their God. It worked for them (even though God was not truly involved) and Jephthah was willing to try anything to obtain victory even if that meant a human sacrifice.

The Daughter's Lament

The fact that her virginity is bewailed in verses 36-40 seems to imply that there was no hope for children in the future because of her anticipated death. Her lamentation "is probably mentioned to give greater force to the sacrifice, as it would leave him without issue, which in the east was considered a special misfortune."¹

Proponents of the non-sacrificial view state, in opposition to this argument, that it would make no sense for the daughter to bewail her virginity away from home for two months if she was to be sacrificed in death.

In answer, it might be said that, the girl simply wanted to be alone. She could not find comfort or entertainment in the common joys of home, when she knew the fate that laid ahead. On the other hand, if she was to live and remain a virgin, what sense would there be in taking those two months to mourn? In what way would she be more ready

¹Davis, Conquest and Crisis, pp. 127-28.

to be a virgin after those two months than before?¹

Great stress is placed upon the fact in verse 34 that this was Jephthah's only child. In ancient Israel, the fact that Jephthah's daughter bore no child meant more than a tragedy of a life unfulfilled. This would mean a loss of the whole family of Jephthah in the future. His descendants would end. This was a real moment of tragedy. The great grief of Jephthah, the two months of mourning and the annual four day feast would hardly be likely if perpetual virginity were just involved. The point is not just that she would continue being a virgin but the fact that she would die that way in two months.²

An Argument of Degree

In Judges 12:1-7 is the account of the Ephraimites complaining that they had not been called on to help fight against the Ammonites. In response to this Jephthah gathers the men of Gilead to fight against Ephraim. Verse 6 records that 42,000 Ephraimites were killed.

One may then argue that if Jephthah could lead in the slaughter of 42,000 Israelites, he would certainly be capable of this vow and its fulfillment.³

¹M. S. Terry, "Book of Judges to 2 Samuel," in vol. 3 of Commentary of the Old Testament, ed. D. D. Whedon (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1873), p. 242.

²Arthur E. Cundall, "Judges," in The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), pp. 147-48.

³Davis, Conquest and Crisis, pp. 127-28.

The Linguistic Argument

Besides the arguments already presented there are certain grammatical and syntactical facts that help substantiate these claims and prove that Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter.

The Use of the Infinitive Absolute

The use of the infinitive absolute, **וְהָיָה** in verse 30, may suggest that Jephthah in his vow is pushing his bargaining with the Lord to its very limits. Gesenius suggests that very frequently in conditional sentences after **אִם** (this is the case in this verse), "the infinitive absolute emphasizes the importance of the condition on which some consequence depends." In addition, when it is used before the main verb it strengthens the verbal idea. This shows the certainty, forcibleness and completeness of an occurrence.¹

Unlike his earlier scheme with the elders of Gilead, this one is addressed to God directly, with pressuring language. In other words, he was saying to God, "really do this for me . . . I will really do this for you." The intensity of the protasis leads to a determined fulfillment of the apodasis.² This concurs with the conclusion drawn earlier that Jephthah is seeking to bind and

¹F. Gesenius, Hebrew Grammar, trans. A. E. Cowley, ed. E. Kautzsch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), pp. 342-43.

²Trible, "A Meditation in Mourning," p. 61.

manipulate God. The meaning of his words is doubt and not faith.

The Comer Forth

Much has been made over the use of אָשׁר and the ambiguity of the vow. Thus, as it has been shown, the one who comes forth has been taken to mean anything from dog to human. This ambiguity is solved by the words וַיֵּצֵא לִקְרָאתִי. The word לִקְרָאתִי is the construct infinitive form of the verb קָרָא with the first person singular suffix. It means "to meet" or "to encounter."¹ It carries the idea of two people coming towards each other. This phrase is never used of animals. Literally, it is the comer-forth that comes forth. The phrase implies, that from the very beginning, a human sacrifice is contemplated.²

The Use of ׀

Some commentators state that the Hebrew conjunction ׀ should be translated "that whatever comes through the door shall either be dedicated to the Lord or, (if it should be a sacrificial animal), I will offer it up as a burnt offering."³ While it is true that the conjunction

¹BDB, pp. 896-97.

²Burney, Judges, p. 319; and George Foot Moore, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), p. 300.

³Keil and Delitzsch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, p. 389; This was first suggested by Rabbis David and Moses Kimchi who were brothers about 1200 A.D. (see section on Historical Argument).

can be translated alternatively (disjunctively), it is extremely doubtful whether it is used in that way here.

Francis Andersen states, "two actions are only likely to be represented as alternatives if they are in some way similar."¹ For an example he cites Genesis 40:21-22 where it reads, "Pharoah will restore his butler to his post and (וְעַתָּה) he will execute his baker." This states the facts focusing on the importance of Pharoah and playing down the fate of the two slaves. Andersen suggests that it would be strained to translate it alternatively as, "Pharoah will either return his butler to his post or he will execute his baker." Pharoah will do one of two things but the two acts are not mutually exclusive. If Pharoah would have said that he would "either return his butler to his post or execute his butler," this then would make sense.²

Comparing this to Judges 11:31, it can be seen that the alternative sense will not fit. To say that Jephthah would dedicate to the Lord a person, if a person met him, or offer a burnt offering, if an animal met him, is like comparing two completely different things. The conjunction "and" must be used emphasizing the fate of the daughter and the action of the father.

For the correct use of the alternative form of ו

¹Francis I. Andersen, The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1974), pp. 67-68.

²Ibid.

one may examine Exodus 21:15. It states here, "He who strikes his father or his mother (וְאָבִיו) will be executed." In this verse the similarity between the objects connected is clear and the context freely allows this use.¹

The Grief of Jephthah

The grammar of verse 35 points out the horror of the situation. Jephthah rents his clothes. It is a gesture of despair, grief and mourning. But who is Jephthah mourning for? The narrative hints that he mourns for himself and not his daughter. A cry is sounded (אֶהְיֶה), Oh No! And then comes words of accusation. "You have brought me low (הִקְרַצְתָּנִי); you (וְאַתָּה) have become my calamity (בְּעֵקְבִי)." In the first clause the hiphil infinitive absolute stresses the devastating deed of the daughter. At the beginning of the second clause, the personal pronoun stresses the fact that Jephthah feels she is the cause of the calamity.² The LXX adds the clause, "you have become a stumbling block before me." All blame is turned upon her.

A Literal Fulfillment

The text simply states וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ כְּאֵת נִדְרוֹ--"he did to her his vow." The plain reading would have us to assume that he literally carried out what he had vowed. Burney states, "the narrator draws a veil over the final tragedy;

¹Ronald J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 72.

²Trible, "A Meditation in Mourning," p. 65.

but there can be no doubt that he intends to imply that the sacrifice was carried out."¹ The whole passage points to this tragic fulfillment.

In verses 30-31, Jephthah makes a vow to offer the one that comes forth as a burnt offering. The daughter's response was **עֲשֵׂה לִי כַאֲשֶׁר יָצָא מִפִּיךָ**, "do to me according to that which proceeded out of your mouth." The sense is that the daughter was telling her father to do exactly like the words he had vowed. The girl shows tremendous respect and submission to her father whom she loved.

It is not an accident that in verse 39 **עֲשֵׂה** appears again. Jephthah **עָשָׂה** did to her as he had vowed and also he did **עָשָׂה** what his daughter asked him to do **עֲשֵׂה**, i.e. to fulfill his vow exactly.

The final reference to the virginity of Jephthah's daughter is added to point out the tragedy of the affair "she knew no man." Here the perfect **יָדְעָה** would be better read as a pluperfect giving the sense, "she had never known a man" emphasizing this ultimate fate.²

Therefore, it is clear that neither option suggested by the non-sacrificial view is satisfactory in explaining this account. Although the law would have permitted him to redeem his daughter with money, the fact is that he did not consider this option. Also, the argument that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to temple service is

¹Burney, Judges, p. 324.

²Cundall, "Judges," p. 148.

an extremely weak one. The women referred to in 1 Samuel 2:22 are not said to be permanent servants for the tabernacle. John J. Davis states, "there is no evidence in this text, or any other text in the Old Testament, of an ancient equivalent of the modern-day nun."¹ It must be concluded then that Jephthah literally offered his daughter as a burnt offering.

An Argument From History

Another argument and one most interesting is the argument from history. As one looks at the history of interpretation concerning this passage, it becomes clear that the majority of interpreters through the ages have assumed that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter unto death. As far back as can be traced, it is the opinion of those who read this passage, that the story should be taken in its literal sense.

The earliest Jewish interpreters take it this way, such as Jonathan the Targumist.² According to the Talmud, Jephthah was one of three men who spoke such a foolish vow.³ Josephus simply records, "Accordingly when that time was over, he sacrificed his daughter as a burnt-offering, offering such an oblation as was neither conformable to the

¹Davis, Conquest and Crisis, p. 126.

²Arthur P. Stanley, Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 1:318.

³Slotki, Judges, p. 256.

law, nor acceptable to God. . . ."¹ Ginzburg states that as punishment, Jephthah died a horrible death according to Jewish legend.²

The LXX seems to take this passage as meaning that a human sacrifice is involved when it translates verse 31 ὁ ἐμπορευόμενος, whosoever comes forth.

All the Church Fathers seem to understand this also in its plain and normal way.³

It was not until about 1200 A.D. that Rabbi David Kimchi and his brother Moses Kimchi suggested an alternative view. They translated the ׀ alternatively (disjunctively), as "or." Thus, they read verse 31 as follows: "I will offer it for a burnt offering if it be fit for such a purpose, or, if not fit, I will consecrate it to the Lord." Thus, Kimchi explains that Jephthah built a house for his daughter, in which she was kept in isolation from the world, and thus, in perpetual virginity; and that annually the daughters of Israel went to visit her.⁴ This explanation with various modification has gained acceptance since that time by both Jewish and Christian interpreters.

The literal interpretation, however, has always had

¹Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, trans. William Whiston in Josephus: Complete Works (Grand Rapids: Kregal Publication, 1960), pp. v, vii, 10.

²Louis Ginzburg, The Legends of the Jews, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 4:46.

³Stanley, History of the Jewish Church, p. 318.

⁴Burney, Judges, p. 324.

support and now seems to be the view generally accepted. The non-sacrificial has arisen as a result of these Rabbis from the Middle Ages. It has been accepted by some to exonerate a judge in Israel. There always is a tendency to look at Bible characters overlooking their flaws. Consequently, for an example, people remember Samson's strength but not his lust. The judges especially seem to be presented as persons from whom deliverance is not to be expected in virtue of their personal qualities and yet God still uses them.

The argument from history points out this tendency but as honest Bible interpreters, scholars must examine the cold harsh facts of scripture seeing men's failures as well as their admirable attributes.

A Summary Argument

Two arguments of the non-sacrificial view not answered specifically have been that of public opposition and the argument from silence. Both of these arguments are so extremely weak that only a summary comment need be made.

To think that the Jewish nation would have resisted Jephthah's attempt to sacrifice his daughter in great public opposition is absolutely ludicrous. The whole nation was doing what was right in their own eyes. It was a time of sin and an abandonment of the law. In fact, it was because of their disobedience to the law that they were now being judged. It would actually be surprising if there

were public opposition during this time of spiritual apostasy in Israel.

The argument from silence is never a good argument and so it is the case here. To say that scripture is silent as to Jephthah actually sacrificing his daughter is just not true. As has been pointed out scripture is very explicit in telling us that Jephthah carried out his vow exactly in the terms he had expressed.

CONCLUSION

While the arguments of the non-sacrifice view are many, they lost their strength in light of the plain wording of the biblical text. It is clear that death was the final outcome and not virginity. This writer thinks there is no doubt that the body of the young girl was pledged to the Lord and that Jephthah, feeling that he had no alternative, killed her.

But Jephthah had victory over the Ammonites. Are we to conclude then that God honored his vow? This author's conclusion is no. God did not command Jephthah to make a burnt offering like He had Abraham. Jephthah acted on his own accord. He placed himself in a situation where he could not win. He either had to break his vow to God or sacrifice his daughter. Understanding the times of the judges and the character of Jephthah, makes it evident that he considered a broken vow much more serious than sacrificing his daughter, which was an accepted practice at this time by many. However, God did not honor the vow of Jephthah for God never honors sin. He did not honor Jephthah's vow, just as He did not honor Rahab's lie, or David's adultery, or our sins, and yet He still uses people for His purpose, to carry out His plan and program. Jephthah's

name appears in Hebrews 11 because he was a follower of Yahweh and sometime during his six year judgeship, he showed great faith, but certainly not because of this situation. Judges 11 shows his lack of faith.

The account that has been studied turns out to be one of the most pathetic stories of the Bible since Jephthah actually sacrifices his own daughter as a burnt offering to the Lord. The girl was the victim of her father's rashness and also of his cowardice in not risking the consequence of a broken vow. Jephthah did not live in a vacuum but was a man of his times, society and culture. He might have thrown himself on the mercy of the Lord and asked to be relieved from a vow because the terms of that vow became distorted beyond his control. But he preferred not to provoke the Lord's displeasure, and so the girl was sacrificed. If there is a hero in the story, it must be the daughter, who showed courage and submission as she willingly subjected herself to this tragic vow. The courage of this one was so admired, that the daughters of Israel came four days each year to commemorate the loss of the girl.

Certainly the Book of Judges is a very dark time in the history of Israel because of sin, spiritual apostasy and moral relativism, and even in this time of apparent victory, there is tragic personal defeat in the life of a judge in Israel.

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