

Jephthah

I just love Jephthah, one of history's most misunderstood characters.

I just love his words "for I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow."

I find these some of the most beautiful words of the OT – I wish I could live like that.

The story of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:31-40) is a strange one and has puzzled believers throughout the centuries. It is a shame that this story detracts from the full details of the life of this giant of faith.

How do we know Jephthah was truly a man of God? Under inspiration, he is listed in Hebrews 11 as one of the faithful of old. Hebrews 11:32 gives us a selection of four of the 'Judges' from the book of Judges to represent all the men and women of faith. They were:

- i. Gideon (we'd all probably agree with that choice)
- ii. Samson (didn't he keep the company of prostitutes?)
- iii. Barak (didn't he just play second fiddle to Deborah – and hide behind a woman's skirts?)
- iv. Jephthah (didn't he kill his daughter?)

Don't you just love the way God picks the misfits, the ones we would have rejected?

Each of these has their story, but for now we look at Jephthah, and hopefully we will see that Jephthah is the most profound type of Jesus anywhere in the Old Testament - a much closer parallel with Jesus than Moses, Joshua or Joseph.

I will describe a person to you...just sit back after you've read this and think of who it might be.

There was a man in Israel who was rejected because of his birth. He was born under peculiar circumstances, and people wondered about his parents. The Jewish people were very concerned about their heritage, their pure line back to Abraham and if a man could not prove that line through both parents, then the leaders of Israel would reject him. The Elders of Israel, and his own brothers, rejected this man because of who his parents were (or were not).

So he was rejected and despised by his own people. They wanted nothing to do with him. They forced him to leave his home. He found himself 'a prophet without honour in his own country'.

He was also denied his rightful inheritance. As the first-born of his father, he should have been given his father's inheritance. He was denied this inheritance by his brothers who wanted to take it for themselves.

He was put out of his home, his family and his country, and went to live far away in the area of Galilee. Here he found acceptance with the Galileans.

While in Galilee, he gathered around him a group of rough men. They were not the sorts of men that would appeal to those down south. With these new friends in Galilee, he started to do great things and their exploits became so great that their fame began to spread throughout the whole country of Israel. People all over Israel heard of their great deeds.

At that time, a great enemy opposed the people of Israel. Because they had sinned, God had allowed parts of Israel to be ruled by a fierce nation. The people of Israel were desperate for salvation.

They turned to Galilee, to the very one they had rejected, and asked him to come back as their saviour. He came to them, bringing salvation from Galilee.

But he came to them, **only on condition** that they recognise him as their elder brother, and their head. He demanded that they confront the error of his rejection; he brought salvation only on the condition that they accept him as their older brother and their leader that they once rejected.

And the Spirit of the Lord was on him.

His generation was cut off...he left no line of children in Israel. He gave the greatest sacrifice a man in the ancient world could give. He sacrificed his line and lineage in Israel...not for those who had loved him, but for those who had despised and rejected him. In those days, the most important thing a man had was his family name and inheritance, which passed to his children after his death. If a man left no children, no son or grandson, then he lost his most precious possession. This man gave up his place in Israel...not for himself...but for his brothers who had once rejected him.

But he gained a greater family. He left no natural family but won a more numerous family. All those who had rejected him now accepted him as their older brother. He became the head and elder brother of a much greater family in Israel, than he could ever have had from a natural line of children.

And he destroyed the pride out of Israel.

Who could I be talking about but Jephthah the Gileadite!!

Did you think of someone else?

I guess we all thought of Jesus when we heard that description. Jephthah's life was so much like our Lord's.

Read the book of Judges chapters 11 and 12.

Jephthah was born in Gilead (the land east of the Jordan River, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea). He was the son of a prostitute, and as such he was not considered to be a legitimate son and heir of Gilead his father. Jephthah was the first born of Gilead, and so was due to inherit his father's land. However, the younger sons born to Gilead's wife, rejected him and threw him out and refused him his rightful inheritance, because he was the son of a prostitute.

Expelled from his home by his brothers, he went to live in the land of Tob (Southern Galilee). There he collected a group of rough friends who would go raiding with him, against the surrounding nations (the Ammonites, and Ammorites). Their exploits soon made them well known.

Then the Ammonites made war against eastern Israel, and the men of Gilead realised that they were in need of the very person they had rejected. They sent to Jephthah and asked him and his men to come and save them from the Ammonites. Jephthah replied that they had rejected him,

and that he would only come back on condition that they accept him as their ruler and their head. The men of Gilead swore before the Lord that they would indeed do this.

Then Jephthah sent messages to the King of Ammon, asking that they resolve their differences peacefully. Jephthah clearly told the king of Ammon that the Lord had not promised the land of Ammon to the people of Israel. Israel had been instructed to leave the land of Moab and Ammon alone, as these lands had been promised as an inheritance to the children of Lot (Abraham’s nephew). The King of Ammon refused to listen to Jephthah, and the battle was to go ahead.

Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah and he made an extraordinary vow to God. Jephthah promised God that, if he was granted victory in this battle, he would give to God the first thing that came out of the doors of his house, as a burnt offering.

Jephthah battled with the Ammonites, and God gave him victory over them. Then, on his victorious return to his home, his daughter, his only child, came out to greet him. Jephthah, true to his vow, told his daughter that he must fulfil what he has promised to God. She asks that he let her have two months to “bemoan her virginity”. Then he did to her according as he had vowed.

The story of Jephthah is a wonderful example to all believers, of one man’s faith. We sometimes wonder why it appears as though he sacrificed his daughter. God never now demands human sacrifice (but accepts it in the case of Jesus our Lord who gave his own life, and in us “who daily make spiritual sacrifice”). Jephthah voluntarily made the vow to God (God did not ask for it). Jephthah may have offered his own daughter as a burnt offering, or may have dedicated her to God, so that she remained a virgin (unmarried) all her life, in service to her God. In either case, she was Jephthah’s only child, and so he would have no grandchildren – no offspring to carry on his name in Israel.

So whether Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, or dedicated her as a virgin all her days, the outcome is the same – he lost his line in Israel. He gave up the greatest possession a man had. He had no more children, no grandchildren, and his line died out of Israel. And he did all this for those who had despised and rejected him, to bring them salvation.

The Israelites in Ephraim (on the west bank of the Jordan), crossed over the Jordan River to make war on Jephthah. Ephraim was the most numerous tribe in Israel, and they wanted to be a part of every victory. Their pride was at stake. God gave Jephthah another great victory, and the men of Ephraim were destroyed, teaching them that God wins battles for the believers, not the pride of men.

Below is a comparison of the lives of Jephthah and Jesus in tabular form.

| Jephthah | Jesus |
|---|--|
| The illegitimate son of his Father. His brothers asked, "where is your mother", knowing he was the son of a prostitute. | The supposed illegitimate son of Mary. The Scribes and Pharisees said to him.. “We have Abraham as our father”...implying that Jesus didn't. |
| Rejected and thrown out by the rulers of his people and his own brothers. | The Jews rejected Jesus as " a prophet without honour in his own country". |

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| He was denied his rightful inheritance as the firstborn of his father. | The Jewish leaders said of Jesus "here is the son and heir..Let's kill him that the inheritance may be ours". |
| He ran away to Tob (Southern Galilee) | Jesus went to Galilee where he found the acceptance that he did not find with the Jewish leaders. |
| Here he collects a band of followers – all rough men | Jesus collected 'rough' men of Galilee as disciples. |
| Their exploits make them famous. | Their miracles spread their fame. |
| Jephthah comes as a saviour from Tob (Galilee). Ammon oppressed Israel at that time as a consequence of Israel's own sin. | Jesus comes as a saviour from Galilee. The Romans oppressed Israel. We are all oppressed by death as a consequence of our sin. |
| Jephthah's family and the elders of Israel appealed to him to come and save them. He only was willing to come as their saviour IF they recognised him as their head and older brother. | Jesus also saves us on the condition that we recognise him as our head and older brother. |
| When in desperate trouble, the family of Jephthah and the Elders of Israel turned to their saviour and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. accepted him as their leader and older brother. ii. asked for his help iii. made him their judge (or king) | In the future, natural Israel will see Jesus as their saviour and will accept him as their leader and older brother, will ask for his help and will make him their judge (or king) |
| He defeated Israel's great enemy with God's spirit and power. | Jesus defeated sin & death for us and will defeat enemies of Israel in the future |
| The spirit of God was on him | Jesus had the unbounded spirit of God. |
| His victory cost him his line and lineage in Israel – his virgin daughter stayed a virgin. He made the greatest sacrifice...not for himself, but for those who had rejected him. | "He was cut off out of the land of the living...and he was left with no generation...(Isaiah 53)" "While we were yet sinners he died for us". |

| | |
|---|---|
| But Jephthah inherited a greater family ... all of the Israelites in Gilead | Jesus inherited all the believers as his brothers and sisters. He "saw the childbirth of his soul" (Isaiah 53). |
| He destroyed Ephraim...the pride of Israel. | Jesus brings salvation at a cost...the destruction of our pride. |

Now we can review the curiosity of the daughter, and her fate.

A few points in summary;

God did not ask for the sacrifice. Jephthah offered it. However – Jephthah is placed in the list of faithful people in Hebrews 11, so we can assume God accepted the sacrifice.

God has asked for human sacrifice in the past - notably Gen 22:2 **‘Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."**

Although God stopped the final act – it remains that God asked for it! God will NEVER ask us to sin – ever. Therefore the sacrifice if Isaac would not have been a sin.

We really don’t have a full comprehension of God’s morality. We don’t see the whole picture...and we wont until the kingdom age (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Now, back to Jephthah’s vow. This vow was a direct response to the Spirit of the Lord upon him. As soon as he was flooded with the Spirit – he commits himself to the vow.

“Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon. 30 And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said , If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, 31 Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”

And we should note that Jephthah never vowed to give his daughter. He may not have expected a human to come out.

Almost all translations say...**whatever comes out ...not whoever.**

I will **offer itnot him/her.** They may have lived in a compound, and opening a gate would release a goats or a sheep. Did he expect one of these?

Who was in charge of these events?

Who had control over who emerged from the House?

God did.

It was God who had it in His control.

I believe it was done to set up the parallel of ‘and who shall declare his generation’

However, Jephthah MAY not have killed his daughter.

She went to bewail the fact that she would always be single. (Judges 11: 37) **“But grant me this one request,” she said. “Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.”) – she did not lament losing her life.**

The vow MAY have been converted to a ‘living offering’ – devoted to God.

The main moral to the Jephthah’s daughter’s story does not depend on whether she died, or remained a virgin. The point is that she was Jephthah’s ONLY child

11:34 ‘When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter.’ Notice the repetitive emphasis – ‘only child’, ‘except for her he had neither son nor daughter’.

He lost his line and lineage in Israel, a terrible price for a man to pay...saving those who despised him. This exactly mirrors Jesus, who gave up his line/lineage to save us while we were sinners. Both Jephthah and Jesus lost their ‘inheritance’ in the process of saving sinners.

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