

Did Jephthah really sacrifice his daughter ? An analysis of Judges 11:31

Note: the below is a chapter from the book of E. W. Bullinger : [Great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 11](#), Kregel Publications, 1979, pp. 324-331. This book as well as all other work of E. W. Bullinger is in the public domain (i.e. free from copyright).

Jephthah is introduced to us under the same title as Gideon, «a mighty man of valour» (Judges 11:1)

Again, we have not to consider his history as a man, but his faith, which was of God.

He was one who feared Jehovah. In his earliest words he calls Jehovah to witness; and he afterwards went and “uttered all his words before Jehovah, in Mizpeh” (v. 11)

His message to the king of Ammon (vv. 14-27) shows that he was well versed in the history of His people, as recorded in “the book of the Law”. He must have studied it closely and to some purpose ; for he not only knew the historical events as facts, but he recognised them as being ordered by Jehovah.

He traced all to Jehovah. It was He Who had “delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel” (v.21). It was Jehovah, God of Israel, who had disposed the Amorites before His people (v.23). What Jephthah and Israel would now possess was what God had given to them (v. 24). And it was Jehovah, the Judge, Whom he called on to judge between Israel and Ammon (v. 27).

Jephthah had *heard* the words of Jehovah as written down in the Scriptures of truth; and he believed them.

This is exactly an instance of what the Apostle refers to in Hebrews xi. He, too, knew the history which Jephthah believed, and the

faith which conquered through God. This it is that gives Jephthah his place in this great “cloud of witnesses.”

When he had thus called on God to judge, we read: “Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah,” and we again note the words which this describe the action of the Holy Spirit in that dispensation (v.29).

In the power of that Holy spirit, Jephthah undertook the war with Ammon, and Jehovah crowned his faith by delivering the Ammonites into his hand (v.32).

This is the exceedingly simple account of Jephthah’s overcoming faith; and there is little to be added to it. He had simply read what Jehovah had done; and thus heard what He had said. He believed what he had thus read and heard, and this is quite sufficient to cause him to be placed among the “elders who received a good report” on account of their faith.

But in the case of Jephthah, as in no other, we feel compelled to go out of our way to vindicate him from what we shall show to be the unjust judgement of men.

His God-wrought faith must not be tarnished without the sure and certain warrant of the word of God itself.

Like Moses, Jephthah “spake unadvisedly with his lips,” but this does not touch his faith in what he had heard from God; his vow was made according to his zeal, but not according to knowledge. That he would sacrifice his daughter, and that God would not reprobate by one word of disapproval a human sacrifice is a theory incredible. It is only a human interpretation, on which Theologians have differed in all ages, and which has been reached without a careful examination of the text.

It is important to remember that the ancient Jewish Commentator Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1232) renders the words of the vow (Judges 11:31) very differently from the A.V (editor’s note: A.V. = Authorised version, KJV) and R.V. (editor’s note: R.V. = Revised

version), and he tells us that his father Rabbi Joseph Kimchi (died 1180) held the same view. Both father and son, together with Rabi Levi ben Gerson (born 1288), all of them among the most eminent of Hebrew grammarians and commentators, who ought to know better than any Gentile commentator, gave their unqualified approval to the rendering of the words of the vow which, instead of making it relate to **one** object, translate and interpret it as consisting of **two distinct parts**.

This is done by observing the well known rule that the connective particle ו (vau, our English v) is often used as a **disjunctive**, and mean “or”, when there is a second proposition. Indeed this rendering is suggested in the margin of the A.V.

The following passages may be consulted:

Genesis 41:44

“Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I *am* Pharaoh, and without thee shall no man lift up his hand **OR** foot in all the land of Egypt.”

Exodus 20:4

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, **OR** any likeness of *any thing* that *is* in heaven above, **OR** that *is* in the earth beneath, **OR** that *is* in the water under the earth”

Exodus 21:15

“He that smiteth his father, **OR** his mother, shall be surely put to death.”

Exodus 21:17

“He that curseth his father, **OR** his mother, shall surely be put to death.”

Exodus 21:18

“if men strive together, and one smite another with a stone, **OR** with *his* fist, and he die not, but keepeth *his* bed”

Numbers 16:14

“Moreover thou hast not brought us into a land that floweth with milk and honey, **OR** given us inheritance of fields and vineyards: wilt thou put out the eyes of these men? we will not come up.”

Numbers 22:26

“And the angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place, where *was* no way to turn either to the right hand **OR** to the left.”

Deuteronomy 3:24

“what God *is there* in heaven **OR** in earth” &c.

2 Samuel 3:29

“Let it rest on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house; and let there not fail from the house of Joab one that hath an issue, **OR** that is a leper, **OR** that leaneth on a staff, **OR** that falleth on the sword, **OR** that lacketh bread.”

1 Kings 18:10

“there is no nation **OR** kingdom, whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee.”

1 Kings 18:27

“And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he *is* a god; either he is talking, **OR** he is pursuing, **OR** he is in a journey, *or* peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.”

With a negative, the rendering “NOR” is equally correct and conclusive:

Exodus 20:17

“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, **NOR** his manservant, **NOR** his maidservant, **NOR** his ox, **NOR** his ass, **NOR** any thing that *is* thy neighbour's.”

Deuteronomy 7:25

“The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver **OR** gold *that is* on them, **NOR** take *it* unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it *is* an abomination to the LORD thy God.”

2 Samuel 1:21

“neither *let there be* rain, upon you, **NOR** fields of offerings”

Psalms 26:9

“Gather not my soul with sinners, **NOR** my life with bloody men:”

Proverbs 6:4

“Give not sleep to thine eyes, **NOR** slumber to thine eyelids.”

Proverbs 30:3

“I neither learned wisdom, **NOR** have the knowledge of the holy.”

We are now in a position to read and understand the word of Jephthah's vow, where we have the same word, or rather the letter which represents it, in Hebrew.

“Jephthah vowed a vow (i.e., made a solemn vow) unto Jehovah,” which he had a perfect right to do. Such a vow was provided for in the Law which prescribed exactly what was to be done in such cases ; and

even when the vow affected a person (as it did here) that person could be redeemed if it were so desired. See Lev. 27 where in verses 1-8 it affected “persons,” and verses 9-13 it affects “beasts”; and verses 14-15 a house.

It thus seems clear that Jephthah’s vow consisted of two parts; one alternative to the other. He would either dedicate it to Jehovah (according to Lev. 27), or, if unsuitable for this, he would offer it as a burnt offering.

It should be noted also that, when he said “whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me,” the word “whatsoever” is Masculine. But the issuer from his house was Feminine, and therefore could not come, properly, within the sphere of his vow certainly not according to the literal meaning of his words.

In any case, it should have been unlawful, and repugnant to Jehovah, to offer a human being to Him as a burnt-offering, for His acceptance.

Such offerings were common to heathen nations at that time, but it is noteworthy that Israel stands out among them with this great peculiarity, that human sacrifices were unknown in Israel.

It is recorded that Jephthah “did with her according to his vow which he had vowed, and she knew no man” (v. 39). What has this to do with a burnt offering, one way or the other? But it has everything to do with the former part of his vow, in dedicating her to Jehovah. This seems to be conclusive. It has nothing to do with a sacrificial death, but it has to do with a dedicated life. She was dedicated to a perpetual virginity.

To what else can the “custom of Israel” refer (v. 39, 40) when “the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four day in a year” (v.40).

The word rendered “lament” occurs only in one other passage in the Hebrew Bible, and that happens to be in this very book. So that we could not possibly have a surer guide to its meaning.

The passage is in Judges 5:11, “There shall they **rehearse** the righteous acts of Jehovah.” It means to **talk with others** hence to rehearse together.

This being done annually, the friends of Jephthah’s daughter went to rehearse with her, this continued virginity of her life, and not to mourn over the past fact of her death.

We may conclude from the whole tenor of scripture, as well as from Psalms 106: 35-38, Isaiah 57:5 etc., that human sacrifices were abomination in the sight of God; and we cannot imagine that God would accept, or that Jephthah would offer, human blood.

To uphold this idea is a libel on Jehovah as well as on Jephthah.

We can understand Voltaire and other infidels doing this, though they reason in a circle, and depend on the two cases of Isaac and Jephthah’s daughter (which we dispute) to support their contention. Their object is clear. But what are we to say of the “higher” critics, most of whose conclusions are to be found in some shape or another, in the writings of French and English Atheists and Deists of the last century?

On the other hand, it is worthy of note to remark how the enemy of God’s word has used even innocent persons to perpetuate traditions which bring a slur on Jehovah’s works and words.

Milton’s words combined with Haydn’s music (The Oratorio of “The Creation”) have riveted the tradition on the minds of all that God created “chaos,” whereas “all His works are perfect” in beauty and in order.

Milton’s words, again, combined with Handel’s music (the Oratorio of “Jephthah”) have perpetuated the tradition that an Israelite father offered his daughter as a burnt-offering to Jehovah.

It is too much to hope that these words of ours can do much to break the tether of tradition with regard to either of the above important subjects.

There is Rutualism to contend with on one hand, but there ***Ritualism*** on the other; and so deep are the ruts, that only the strongest faith (like the strongest axles) can get out of them with success.

We need something of Jephthah's faith in the inspired records of God's Word and works. He believed what Jehovah had caused to be written in "the book of the Law." He had read and pondered over those records of Jehovah's words and works, or he could not have spoken so strongly and so truly of what had been written for his learning.

May it be ours to have a like faith, so that when we have to contend with those who oppose us, we may not depend on our own arguments or our own wisdom, but quote God's Word written, and use "the sword of the Spirit" – the God-breathed words which are so profitable to equip the man of God, and all who would speak for Him, when we meet with those who "resist the truth."

Jephthah had heard,

Jephthah had believed, and

Jephthah was one of that group of overcomers who conquered through God

E.W. Bullinger