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A TRAGIC VOW? ANALYZING THE MEANING OF JEPHTHAH'S VOW IN JUDGES
11:29-40 AND ITS PLACE IN DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY

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Introduction

The vow of Jephthah is “without parallel in the book or the Bible and is unique within the Jephthah narrative itself.”¹ The issue of whether Jephthah really sacrificed his daughter, as one commenter stated, “has occupied the minds of commentators from time immemorial.”² It has also “gripped the imagination of creative artists from ancient to modern times.”³ This story has even been the question of feminist studies, with the unnamed daughter of Jephthah being subject to greater celebration.⁴ In short, the question of Jephthah's vow, its object and nature, is one of great interest, and even greater debate.

To properly consider this vow of Jephthah, this paper will primarily focus on its placement in Judg 11:29-40. Considerable attention will be given to interpretive challenges found dispersed throughout the pericope, especially related to the object and nature of the vow. Next, I will consider this passage within the context of Deuteronomistic History, contending that common thematic emphases present in the story and framework speak toward a specific interpretive conclusion. Finally, this interpretation will be considered in light of the redemptive work of Christ. I argue that Jephthah through his vow *intended* to garner YHWH's favor through a literal human sacrifice, which ended up being his very own daughter.

¹ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC v. 6 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 365.

² Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 326.

³ David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 7.

⁴ See as examples, Phyllis Trible, “The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice,” in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, 2. pr., Overtures to Biblical Theology 13 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 93–118; Anat Koplowitz-Breier, “A Nameless Bride of Death: Jephthah's Daughter in American Jewish Women's Poetry,” *Open Theology* 6.1 (2020): 1–14.

Exposition of the Judges 11:29-40

The literary structure of this pericope is a single dramatic episode with two interlocking major sections that center around Jephthah's making of the vow (vv. 29-33) and the aftermath of it (vv. 34-40).⁵

The Making of the Vow

The beginning of this narrative is marked by the direct involvement of YHWH in Jephthah's story, which began previously in v. 1. Marked by a *wayyiqtol* in v. 29, YHWH is shown as directly involved in the narrative, no longer a bystander or observer, for now the "Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah" (ESV; וַתְּהִי עַל־יִפְתָּח רוּחַ יְהוָה).⁶ This same expression is found in relation to both Othniel (3:10; וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ־יְהוָה) and Gideon (6:34; וַיְהִי רוּחַ יְהוָה לְבָשָׁה).⁷ This is the first explicit indication that YHWH approves Jephthah, the judge, previously chosen to not just be the leader (קָצִין), but to be the head (רֹאשׁ) of Gilead (11:6-11). Further, this expression "leaves us in no doubt that God has chosen to use Jephthah ... to *deliver* Israel."⁸

⁵ Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 325.

⁶ What of the "Spirit of the LORD" rushing upon YHWH? Does that mean YHWH sanctioned the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter? This is a question that will not be able to be explored in the body of this paper but deserves a brief word. Some have argued that the YHWH sanctioned Jephthah's actions (or at least what is a pre-exilic Yahwism). For an example of this view, see Alice Logan, "Rehabilitating Jephthah," *JBL* 128.4 (2009): 672–73. One plausible view is that vv. 30a – 31 is out of place in the text. This assertion is due to the significant repetition of *lexeis*, the "passed over ... the people of Ammon" (vv. 29, 32a). That is, there is a fourfold repetition of the verb עָבַר, linking the divine giving of the Spirit with the Ammonite conflict. Therefore, it is better to read the "Spirit of the LORD" as only pertaining to the military action of vv. 32-33. God's activity results in victory. The vow of vv. 30-31 is then not to be seen as the rotten fruit of the Spirit's presence (i.e., it is not sanctioned). This is clear in the context of Judges and further, in the broader context of Deuteronomistic History. This action of Jephthah is quite different from the other OT human sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac where God is behind the action (Gen 22). For more, including a list of positions with respect to this issue, see Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, *Judges*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 534–36.

⁷ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 364.

⁸ Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 327. Emphasis mine.

In vv. 30-31, the text shifts from the short introduction to what some commentators term “predictive discourse” which is evidenced by the presence of *yiqtols* and *weqatals*.⁹ Here Jephthah “made” (וַיַּדַּר) a vow to the LORD, stating:

אִם־נָתַתָּן תְּתֹנֶן אֶת־בְּנִי עֲמֹן בְּיָדִי
וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדְּלֹתַי בֵּיתִי לִקְרָאתִי ...
וְהָיָה לַיהוָה וְהִעֲלִיתִהוּ עֹלָה: פ

^{30b} If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me ... shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering

There are a few initial observations worth noting. First, in v. 30b there is a conjunction אם (“if”), which introduces the protasis – “if you will give ...”¹⁰ To a reader, it seems strange that Jephthah is so unsure of the outcome as to feel the necessity to make a vow to YHWH, especially after his declaration to the king of the Ammonites, “The LORD, the Judge, decide this day” (v. 27a). Rather than acting with faith-filled courage, the judge responds with faithless doubt. Second, the presence of an emphatic infinitive, נָתַתָּן, (“if you will *really* give”), further betrays a lack of confidence.¹¹ Perhaps this is a measure of creaturely doubt present in other judges, or maybe it suggests something more sinister – what amounts to an attempted bribe. Second, Jephthah, in v. 31, in the apodosis, completes the vow, “then whatever (אֲשֶׁר) comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD’s, and I will offer it up (וְהִעֲלִיתִהוּ) for a burnt offering (עֹלָה).”

In this apodosis are however two key interpretative issues that will be considered to determining the meaning of Jephthah’s infamous vow and the broader passage, which will include

⁹ Boda and Conway, *Judges*, 539.

¹⁰ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd edition. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 154. Used in this way, אם, introduces the “protasis (the ‘if’ statement) of a conditional statement.”

¹¹ Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 328.

necessary exposition of the remaining text: (1) the object of the vow (“whatever”; אֲשֶׁר), and (2) the nature of the vow (“burnt offering”; עֹלָה)

The Object of the Vow

Who or what was the object of Jephthah’s vow to God? In other words, what was the original intention of Jephthah? Certainly, there is some level of uncertainty, but there are nevertheless contextual clues. The majority position is that Jephthah always intended for the sacrifice to be human, but a small minority of scholars have argued the object in Jephthah’s mind was an animal.¹² The object of the vow can be plausibly discerned by the grammar and syntax of the vow, as well as the cultural context. Further literary and redemptive-historical contexts will be discussed later in this paper.

First, with respect to grammar, there is some amount of ambiguity in the language of v. 31 – הַיֹּצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא (“then whatever comes out”). Tribble states that literal meaning of the words is “the comer-forth who comes forth.”¹³ Even more, the masculine gender of these words, though standard, does not wholly indicate species or sex. The substantival masculine singular participle, הַיֹּצֵא (“the one going out”) is used elsewhere to refer to inanimate objects (Num 21:13; 32:24).¹⁴ The use of the infinitive לִקְרָאֵי (liqrāʾī), “to meet me,” can also be used to refer to animals as well as objects. Yet, in nearly every case, the use of the verb יָצָא (yatsa) with לִקְרָאֵי (liqrāʾī) – “to come out to meet”, found in v. 31 in v. 34, is used of persons, *not* animals (cf. 1 Sam 18:6). With respect to these phrases, though suggestive, the context must ultimately determine the referent.

¹² See as an example, Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, AB (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1981), 208.

¹³ Tribble, “The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice,” 97; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 366n88. Block notes that the “*BHS* and other commentaries follow the *LXX* and *Vg* and delete one of the verbs in the first part as a dittographic gloss.”

¹⁴ Robert B Jr Chisholm, “The Ethical Challenge of Jephthah’s Fulfilled Vow,” *BSac* 167.668 (2010): 405.

Second, given the historic and cultural context of an agrarian people in the time of the judges, this may seem to support the presence of livestock and likelihood of an animal being Jephthah's intention. Even more, it appears that some Iron Age houses were designed to "accommodate the livestock as well as the family."¹⁵ This reinforces the view that Jephthah made the vow with warranted expectation that an animal would be the first creature out of the door and therefore, the intended object of the vow to be offered to YHWH. Returning to the text, proponents of this view point to the mention of the "doors" (דָּלֶת) of the house.¹⁶ Yet, Bal says it well when, again referencing the syntax, he says, "animals, unclean or clean, can hardly be expected to come and meet the hero."¹⁷ Hence, the object of the vow is more likely a human than an undefined object or animal, as has been suggested.

The Nature of the Vow

What is the nature of the vow? In vv. 32-33, YHWH gives the Ammonites into Jephthah's hand. Yet tragedy befalls the victorious Jephthah, as when he returns home, he is greeted by his unnamed daughter who "came out (יֵצְאָתָא) to meet him (לִקְרָאֲתוֹ) with tambourines and with dances" (v. 34).¹⁸ As v. 34 begins the next section, vv. 35-38 represent a clear distinct dialogue marked by a *wayehi* temporal (וַיְהִי). Within this dialogue, the result of the vow is realized with heartbreaking somberness.

¹⁵ Boling, *Judges*, 208. According to Boling, modern villagers in the Near East use houses in a similar way to integrate pens.

¹⁶ Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr, 1988), 45. According to Bal, those who assume it was an animal, "are instructed by this drawing that differentiates the gate at the front of the inner court from the doors of the house itself." In other words, the door has one meaning (i.e., animals come through), the gate has another.

¹⁷ Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 45.

¹⁸ This echoes the celebration of Miriam, the sister of Aaron who after the crossing of Red Sea, "took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing." (Exod 15:20)

Now, it has been established that the likely object of the vow was human. If that is the case, Jephthah's daughter, though perhaps not Jephthah's intention, was nonetheless a valid fulfillment of the heinous vow. Still, the question remains, what was the *content* of the vow? What did Jephthah propose to do? Returning to v. 31, the final clause refers to a "burnt offering" (עֹלָה).¹⁹ The plain reading of the text would be that the daughter would be subject to a fiery death. Yet, because the emphasis on the virginity (בְּתוּלִים) of the unnamed daughter in vv. 37-39, a minority of scholars have proposed that Jephthah's vow involved not sacrifice, but *devotion*.²⁰ Furthermore, it is argued that the phrasing of v. 31 is not "it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" but rather, "He will belong to the LORD, *or* I will offer him up as a burnt sacrifice."²¹ Jephthah would devote him or her to service unto YHWH, not to destruction.²²

First, looking at vv. 37-39, the narrator states in v. 39 that "she had never known a man". With respect to the syntax, this disjunctive clause is followed by and preceded by *wayyiqtol* clauses (וַיֵּשֶׁב and וַיִּהְיֶה). The biblical pattern is that the action described in the disjunctive clause is "concurrent or subsequent" to that of the preceding *wayyiqtol* clause (cf. Judg 3:18-19; 9:17-18). If the disjunctive is consequential, that would allow for a celibacy view, but nevertheless, *still* fit

¹⁹ Jack M. Sasson, ed., *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB v. 6D (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2014), 444. Sasson helpfully highlights the violence of this type of offering, usually cosigned to animals, writing "the trussing is brutal, the bleating is shrill, blood spurts everywhere, limbs jerk, and the bowels let go ... these steps cannot be less dramatic with humans as victim." See also William Lee Holladay, "עֹלָה," in *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 273.

²⁰ For instance, see Miles V. Van Pelt, "Rethinking Jephthah's Foolish Vow," *TGC*, 14 October 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/rethinking-jephthah-foolish-vow/>; Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 9. Marcus, also a proponent of consecrated view, gives a brief history of these two views. The earliest Jewish interpretation "found in Pseudo-Philo, Josephus, the Midrash, and the Targum was that the vow was literally carried out." In other words, these sources made the *sacrifice* of the daughter explicit. Even more, the opinion of early Church fathers like Origen and John Chrysostom thought the sacrifice to be literal. The first dissenting view was hinted at in a medieval Jewish exegete, David Kimhi, who argued that sacrifice is that of *virginity*, not of life. This was because, first, the daughter does not mourn for her life, but for her virginity (v. 37). Second, the text did not actually state that Jephthah put his daughter to death. This non-literal conclusion began to grow with Jewish interpreters such as Malbim and critical scholars like F. Delitzsch.

²¹ Chisholm, "The Ethical Challenge of Jephthah's Fulfilled Vow," 406–7. Emphasis original.

²² Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, KEL (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 356. Some leave in view that it could have been an animal and if it was, then that would be sacrificed.

the sacrificial view. In either case, “the reference to her virginity is not a barrier to the sacrificial view.”²³ In terms of the context of these verses, the request for “two months” (vv. 37-39) from the daughter makes little sense if perpetual virginity was the cause of the prolonged mourning. However, agreeing with Sasson, even if Jephthah knew his daughter’s fate, we “are left ... without a clear notion of what the daughter expected her future to be.”²⁴ However, upon return, after Jephthah “did with her according to his vow,” the narrator tells the reader, “She had never known a man” (v. 40).²⁵ The explicit virginity of the daughter points to the tragedy of a premature death and the death of a family line. Even more, there developed tradition to “lament the daughter of Jephthah” (v. 40) This is perhaps even more instructive to us, as “it would not do for the women of Israel to gather four days a year to memorialize a young girl just because she was forced to die a spinster.”²⁶

Second, in respect to the syntax of v. 31, the connection between the first clause and the second clause is *weqatal* (וַיְהִי), which is more likely that of sequential or explicative.²⁷ This specifies exactly how the one “coming through the doors would become the Lord’s.”²⁸ Even more, Chisolm states “when the verbal sequence used here ... appears elsewhere in Joshua, Judges, and Samuel, the second verb can give a sequential or consequential action, provide a complimentary idea, or specify the preceding action, but it *never gives an alternative to the first verb*.”²⁹ Therefore, either Jephthah’s daughter was consecrated to YHWH *through* sacrifice, or she was consecrated

²³ Chisolm, “The Ethical Challenge of Jephthah’s Fulfilled Vow,” 409.

²⁴ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 449.

²⁵ This comment by the narrator may be *parenthetical* or *consequential*.

²⁶ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 449.

²⁷ Chisolm, “The Ethical Challenge of Jephthah’s Fulfilled Vow,” 408.

²⁸ Chisolm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 356.

²⁹ Chisolm, “The Ethical Challenge of Jephthah’s Fulfilled Vow,” 408. To this Chisolm brings a whole host of biblical verses, including: Joshua 1:15; 4:3; 6:18; 7:9; 20:4; 23:12, 16; 24:20; Judges 2:18; 4:6, 20; 6:18; 11:8; 13:3; 16:7, 11, 17; 19:9; 21:21; 1 Samuel 1:22; 2:15, 35; 4:9; 6:8; 8:20; 9:8, 19; 10:4, 6; 12:14; 14:34; 15:3; 16:2, 23; 17:35, 46; 19:2-3; 23:2, 23; 25:5, 31; 31:4; 2 Samuel 6:22; 7:10, 12; 9:10; 11:15; 12:11, 16, 22; 14:3, 26; 15:2, 5, 14, 25; 17:2, 9, 17.

to YHWH and was then sacrificed. For example, the phrase of v. 31f, “and I will offer it/him up as burnt offering” (וְהִעֲלֵיתָהוּ עֹלָה) is also used in 2 Kgs 3:27 (וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עֹלָה) to describe the action of the king of Moab in consecrating his son to Chemosh. Both are *hiphil wayyiqtol*s, and both are followed by the same noun, though different cognates. In 2 Kgs 3:27, it seems clear that this was a real human sacrifice and, therefore, it is suggestive that it is the case here as well.

In short, the likely option from the grammar and syntax of the text is that Jephthah made a vow to sacrifice a human through a burnt offering, which turned out to be his very own daughter.

Deuteronomistic History and the Vow

Based on the above, though there is *probable* cause to believe the object and nature of the vow was the fiery sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah, this viewpoint is even further buttressed when considering this historical narrative in the context of Deuteronomistic History (DtrH).³⁰

To begin with, in considering its contextual feasibility, one wonders why the supposed Deuteronomist (Dtr) would include the story? Even if critical scholars argue for a later editor, or if one questions the story's historicity, why would the author in this tradition include a story about a judge of YHWH sacrificing his own daughter? This would clearly transgress the Deuteronomic Law (cf. Deut 12:29-31; 18:10). Further, it would echo the heinous action of the Moabite king, Mesha, who sacrificed his own son (2 Kings 3:27). As historical-critical scholar Thomas Römer notes, “the worst thing Israel’s and Judah’s rulers did was ‘make children pass through fire’ (2 Kgs 16:3; 17:17; 21:6).”³¹ Römer continues, “it is therefore hard to believe that in the Dtr edition of

³⁰ This paper does not subscribe to all the suppositions of DtrH, and wholeheartedly affirms the historicity of this narrative. Nevertheless, there are shared themes and motifs throughout the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings that are helpful to understanding this text.

³¹ T. Römer, “Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell about the Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter?,” *JSOT* 77 (1998): 31.

Deuteronomy to 2 Kings a divinely inspired saviour should have something to do with human sacrifice.”³² Based on this, Römer even concludes that the “account of Jephthah’s sacrifice *has* to be understood as a post-Dtr text.”³³

Though Römer is correct to see the importance of the why question, he is wrong to discount the originality of this pericope based on literary and thematic contexts. Quite to the contrary, based on the themes of DtrH, the story of Jephthah’s tragic vow fits well into the general moral degradation of Israel and its judges in this book and OT history.³⁴ Specifically, this story exhibits the major Deuteronomic motif that failing to worship *only* YHWH leads to moral deprivation (cf. Deut 29:18-19).³⁵ Biblically, worship of YHWH and law-keeping are intimately related (cf. Deut 8:11-20). Worship, including sacrifice, reveals “where the nation locates authority, including moral authority, and thus is the most obvious sign of Israel’s moral life.”³⁶ This story then is a historical example of this biblical reality. Even more, the placement of this story within the broader narrative of DtrH evinces credibility to the perspective that Jephthah truly meant to, and indeed did, *sacrifice* his only daughter. In other words, this thematic framework does not only allow for the option (i.e., it is not only neutral in character), but rather it moves the reader to conclude this heinous reality. Other options, such as Jephthah intending an animal, or that the vow concerned the virginity of his daughter, lessen the power of this evident degradation. This Deuteronomic

³² Römer, “Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell?,” 31.

³³ Römer, “Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell?,” 31. Emphasis mine. Römer believes this can be confirmed on a literary level, with similar parallels with Num 21:2 (non-Dtr) and Josh 2:19 (which he argues in non-Dtr). It is instead a later Hellenistic insertion.

³⁴ See David Janzen, “Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter,” *JSOT* 29.3 (2005): 339–57. In this article, Janzen responds directly to Römer’s article, and argues a similar point as this paper, including the comparison of themes that I was immensely helped by and have utilized in this paper. See also Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 361.

³⁵ Janzen, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter,” 352–53. Jansen calls this the “most important motif” and phrases it as follows: “when Israel worships like foreigners, it will act as foreigner.”

³⁶ Janzen, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter,” 351.

motif of false worship leading to moral degradation can be seen in the (1) situation of Judges and the (2) *lawless* vow of the Jephthah.

First, with respect to the broader context of Judges, the story of Jephthah shows that the judge was affected by the syncretic religious environment that had become commonplace in Israel in this period. Prior to Jephthah's calling by the elders of Gilead, Israel is not only described as worshiping one foreign god, but served "the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines." (Judg 10:6) The cultic practices even involved child sacrifice (cf. 2 Kgs 3:27).³⁷ They were therefore well immersed in foreign religion and morality, again showing that Israel had failed to drive out the Canaanites. Echoing the DtrH motif, one theme evident in Judges is the slow degrading cycle of disobedience among the Judges, from Othniel (3:7-11) to Samson (13-16).³⁸ Not only is the cycle repeated, but there is also a "continuing decline of characters of Israel and its judges."³⁹ Worship in Israel became more syncretistic, reflecting the other nations. As a result, each judge proves less faithful and less effective than previous judges. Jephthah, the fifth major judge, fits unnervingly neatly into this decline. The famed statement of Judges highlights the end of this moral decline - "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Jephthah's step to sacrifice his daughter is then seen like a neon sign of "Israel's increasingly Canaanized character."⁴⁰

Second, the theme that false worship leads to moral horror can also be seen in the lawless vow. How does the supposed Deuteronomistic narrator regard Jephthah's specific action in this

³⁷ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 367-68. Block states that this vow even bears a "striking resemblance to many vows inscribed in funerary monuments in Carthage by Punic descendants of the Canaanites/Phoenicians in northern Africa."

³⁸ Michael J. Glodo, "Judges," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 184.

³⁹ Janzen, "The Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter," 342.

⁴⁰ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 378.

story? According to Marcus, Jephthah is “not only *not* condemned,” unlike Gideon with the Ephod (Judg 8:27), “but referred to by the same Deuteronomist as a ‘savior of Israel,’” which is hardly an appellation to be applied to one guilty of such a crime.”⁴¹ Another scholar concurs, writing, “what is most baffling about the Jephthah narrative is the author’s seeming neutrality on the subject of human sacrifice.”⁴² If true, this certainly would be troubling to the theological perspective of the DtrH (cf. Deut 12:29-31). However, within the framework of Judges, there is *implicit* condemnation as the narrator’s conceptual point of view “is that of the Deuteronomistic law.”⁴³ Moreover, the unknown narrator naturally assumes the reader is familiar with the law. As such, Jephthah’s vow violates the law *per se*. The law of Moses explicitly condemns human sacrifice (Deut 12:31; 18:10; Lev 18:21; 20:2-4).⁴⁴ Further, Jephthah’s action, though surprising in its heinousness, is not completely contrary to what the reader knows of him to this point. Jephthah is already a complex character who at one level recognizes YHWH to be the only sovereign God (Judg 11:10), but at another level, relies on his own persuasion (cf. 11:7-11). This is certainly true in this episode. Though he may portend to worship YHWH, he lacks covenantal obedience and therefore the means to faithfully worship God. It should be no surprise then that Jephthah was “so determined to achieve victory over the Ammonites that he was willing to sacrifice his own child to gain a divine guarantee.”⁴⁵ Jephthah’s sacrifice consequently fits nicely in this horrid transformation of Israel, who while neglecting God’s law, also actively participate in an illicit Canaanite cultic practice. The vow was therefore *not* tragic in its origin, as it came from a lawless

⁴¹ Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 48. Emphasis original.

⁴² Logan, “Rehabilitating Jephthah,” 667.

⁴³ Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 362.

⁴⁴ J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges, a Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 215. Soggin notes that the OT passes a “severe judgement on the usage in question and condemns it outright.” Yet, for Soggin, who sees this story as a historicization of a myth, this episode shows the Israelite religion as bearing parallels to other religions of the world.

⁴⁵ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 368.

posture of Israel's judge, but it is tragic in that it had devastating consequences for a daughter, and further revealed a people far from YHWH.

New Testament and the Vow

The writer of Hebrews, in the famous "hall of faith" passage, names Jephthah among others, "who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions" (11:33).⁴⁶ However, if the conclusion of this paper is correct, Jephthah is at best a complex figure of faith and failure, and at worst, the nadir of Israel's moral and religious degradation. At some stage, Jephthah misunderstood the nature of his relationship with YHWH. His relationship was not one of grudging bribery, but always that of *grace*. YHWH was with Jephthah in the giving of his Spirit, not because of Jephthah's worthiness but because of his merciful inclination toward his people and desire to save them (cf. Judg 10:16). The vow that Jephthah made in Judg 11:31-32 was never required – God had already decided to save him and his people (v. 29). By making it, Jephthah revealed a lack of faith and a desire for control.

This is even further evidenced by reprehensible content and results of the vow. Jephthah had unknowingly been influenced by the culture that surrounded him, desensitized to violence and even worse, participating in syncretistic worship of YHWH. Jephthah had been shaped to the extent that he viewed a sacrifice as a means by which he could earn salvation for himself and the people. Though to be sure, the Lord did require sacrifice from Jephthah but not of flesh of blood but *obedience*. The prophet Sameul states "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and

⁴⁶ There are those who argue that Jephthah's inclusion in the "hall of faith" is dispositive to the idea that Jephthah could not have sacrificed his daughter. For instance, Van Pelt writes "Notice how the author of the book of Hebrews lists Jephthah with the likes of David, Samuel, and the prophets. Additionally, these men served "by faith" and "executed justice," not innocent young girls. Could the author of Hebrews rightly include Jephthah in this list if his last act as Judge included the illegal and horrific slaying of his own daughter?" See Van Pelt, "Rethinking Jephthah's Foolish Vow." However, this same argument, though perhaps less heinous, could be brought against Gideon or Samson, both judges who had major moral faults.

sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22). Jesus states a similar command of God, chiding the hypocritical Pharisees, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13). If Jephthah had been more acquainted with the law, the vow would never have been carried out, let alone made.⁴⁷

Taken together, the desire for obedience could never be realized by the whims of the worshiper alone, but by the sacrifice of the *only* son of God. Jesus was the better Jephthah, delivering his people with a *pleasing* and holy sacrifice to God. As a result of the mercies of God in Christ, believers are then called to offer right sacrifice. The call of the Christian is “to present [his or her] bod[y] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1a). This holy sacrifice is *true* “spiritual worship.” (Rom 12:1b).

⁴⁷ There is a common strain among some commentators to state that once Jephthah had made his foolish vow, he was forced to carry it out. For instance, Boling writes “the vow once made to Yahweh must be kept.” See Boling, *Judges*, 209. Yet, even within the Pentateuch, there is a recourse for redressing *foolish* vows, even to YHWH (cf. Lev 5:4-6; Lev 27:1-8). In contrast to Boling, “fact of human sacrifice” is *not* “secondary to the theme of the irrevocability of the vow” from the biblical paradigm. The theme is rather that of God’s chosen leader forsaking obedience for the purposes of syncretistic expediency, compounding his foolishness again and again. Yet, the Christian reading this story, knows that he or she is not far off from Jephthah. For more on how Jephthah could have redressed the vow, see Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 377.

Appendix A: Judges 11:29-40 in the ESV, BHS, and LXX

ESV (11:29-40)

²⁹ Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.” ³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. ³³ And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.” ³⁶ And she said to him, “My father, you have opened your mouth to the Lord; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites.” ³⁷ So she said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions.” ³⁸ So he said, “Go.” Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

BHS (11:29-40)⁴⁸

²⁹ וַתְּהִי עַל־יִפְתָּח רוּחַ יְהוָה וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־הַגִּלְעָד וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־מְנַשֶּׁשֶׁה וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־מִצְפָּה גִלְעָד וַיַּעֲבֹר מִצְפָּה גִלְעָד וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־אֲמֹנִיתֵי
³⁰ וַיִּדְרֹךְ יִפְתָּח בְּדֶרֶךְ לִיהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־נָתַן תִּתֵּן אֶת־בְּנִי עִמּוֹן בִּיָּדִי
³¹ וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדֹּלְתִי בֵּיתִי לִקְרָאתִי בְּשׁוֹבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם מִבְּנֵי עִמּוֹן וְהָיָה לִיהוָה וְהַעֲלִיתֵהוּ עֹלָה: ה'
³² וַיַּעֲבֹר יִפְתָּח אֶל־בְּנֵי עִמּוֹן לְהִלָּחֵם בָּם וַיִּתְּנֵם יְהוָה בְּיָדוֹ
³³ וַיִּכֶם מִעֲרוֹעַר וְעַד־בּוֹאֶף מִנִּית עֲשָׂרִים עִיר וְעַד אָבֶל כְּרָמִים מִכָּה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד וַיִּכְנְעוּ בְּנֵי עִמּוֹן מִבְּנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ה'
³⁴ וַיָּבֵא יִפְתָּח הַמִּצְפָּה אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וְהִנֵּה בָתּוּ יֵצֵאת לִקְרָאתוֹ בְּתַפִּים וּבְמַחֲלוֹת וְרַק הִיא יְחִידָה אֵין־לָּהּ מִקְּנֵי בֶן־אִיֶּבֶת
³⁵ וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹתָהּ אוֹתָהּ וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָהָה בָּתִּי הִכְרַעַתְנִי וְאַתָּה הִיִּיתְ בָּעֵקֶרֶי וְאַנְכִי פְּצִיתִי־כִי אֶל־יְהוָה
וְלֹא אוֹכַל לְשׁוּב
³⁶ וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲבִי פְּצִיתָה אֶת־פִּיךָ אֶל־יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה לִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִפִּיךָ אַחֲרֵי אֲשֶׁר עֲשֵׂה לָּהּ יְהוָה נִקְמֹת מֵאִיֶּבֶיךָ מִבְּנֵי עִמּוֹן
³⁷ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־אָבִיהָ יַעֲשֵׂה לִּי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה הַרְפָּה מִמֶּנִּי שְׁנָיִם חֳדָשִׁים וְאַל־כָּה וְנִדְחִתִּי עַל־הַהָרִים וְאַבְכָּה עַל־בְּתוּלִי אֲנִכִּי [=כ=] [וְרַעֲיָתִי] [=ק=] וְרַעֲוִתִּי
³⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר לָכִי וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתָהּ שְׁנֵי חֳדָשִׁים וַתֵּלֶךְ הִיא וְרַעֲוִתֶיהָ וַתִּבְכּוּ עַל־בְּתוּלֶיהָ עַל־הַהָרִים
³⁹ וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנָיִם חֳדָשִׁים וַתָּשָׁב אֶל־אָבִיהָ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ אֶת־נִדְחוֹתָהּ וַיִּדְרֹךְ וַיְהִי לֹא־יָדְעָה אִישׁ וַתִּהְיֶה־חֹק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
⁴⁰ מִיָּמִים יְמִימָה תִּלְכְּנָה בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְתַנּוֹת לְבַת־יִפְתָּח הַגִּלְעָדִי אַרְבַּעַת יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה: ס

⁴⁸ This translation follows the BHS rendering. Although there are slight variants with the pericope, none of the variants impact the meaning of the text in relation to the purpose of this study.

LXX (11:29-40)

²⁹ καὶ ἐγενήθη ἐπὶ Ἰεφθαε πνεῦμα κυρίου καὶ διέβη τὴν γῆν Γαλααδ καὶ τὸν Μανασση καὶ διέβη τὴν σκοπιὰν Γαλααδ καὶ ἀπὸ σκοπιᾶς Γαλααδ εἰς τὸ πέραν υἱῶν Αμμων ³⁰ καὶ ἠῤῥατο Ἰεφθαε εὐχὴν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ εἶπεν ἐὰν παραδώσει παραδῶς μοι τοὺς υἱοὺς Αμμων ἐν χειρὶ μου ³¹ καὶ ἔσται ὃς ἂν ἐξέλθῃ ἐκ τῶν θυρῶν τοῦ οἴκου μου εἰς ἀπάντησίν μου ἐν τῷ ἐπιστρέψαι με ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἀπὸ τῶν υἱῶν Αμμων καὶ ἔσται τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ ἀνοίσω αὐτὸν ὀλοκαύτωμα ³² καὶ διέβη Ἰεφθαε πρὸς τοὺς υἱοὺς Αμμων τοῦ πολεμῆσαι πρὸς αὐτούς καὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτούς κύριος ἐν χειρὶ αὐτοῦ ³³ καὶ ἐπάταξεν αὐτούς ἀπὸ Ἀροηρ καὶ ἕως τοῦ ἐλθεῖν εἰς Σεμωιθ εἴκοσι πόλεις ἕως Ἀβελ ἀμπελώνων πληγὴν μεγάλην σφόδρα καὶ ἐνετράπησαν οἱ υἱοὶ Αμμων ἀπὸ προσώπου υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ ³⁴ καὶ ἦλθεν Ἰεφθαε εἰς Μασσηφα εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτοῦ ἐξεπορεύετο εἰς ἀπάντησιν αὐτοῦ ἐν τυμπάνοις καὶ χοροῖς καὶ αὕτη μονογενὴς αὐτῷ ἀγαπητὴ καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῷ πλην αὐτῆς υἱὸς ἢ θυγάτηρ ³⁵ καὶ ἐγενήθη ἡνίκα εἶδεν αὐτὴν καὶ διέρρηξεν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ καὶ εἶπεν οἴμοι θυγατέρ μου ἐμπεποδοστάτηκάς με εἰς σκῶλον ἐγένου ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς μου ἐγὼ δὲ ἥνοιξα τὸ στόμα μου περὶ σοῦ πρὸς κύριον καὶ οὐ δυνήσομαι ἀποστρέψαι ³⁶ καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν πάτερ μου εἰ ἐν ἔμοι ἥνοιξας τὸ στόμα σου πρὸς κύριον ποίει μοι ὅν τρόπον ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ τοῦ στόματός σου ἀνθ' ὧν ἐποίησέν σοι κύριος ἐκδικήσεις ἐκ τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου ἐκ τῶν υἱῶν Αμμων ³⁷ καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα αὐτῆς καὶ ποίησόν μοι τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο ἕασόν με δύο μῆνας καὶ πορεύσομαι καὶ καταβήσομαι ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη καὶ κλαύσομαι ἐπὶ τὰ παρθενία μου καὶ ἐγὼ καὶ αἱ συνεταιρίδες μου ³⁸ καὶ εἶπεν πορεύου καὶ ἐξαπέστειλεν αὐτὴν δύο μῆνας καὶ ἐπορεύθη αὐτὴ καὶ αἱ συνεταιρίδες αὐτῆς καὶ ἐκλαυσεν ἐπὶ τὰ παρθενία αὐτῆς ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη ³⁹ καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τέλος δύο μηνῶν καὶ ἀνέκαμψεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα αὐτῆς καὶ ἐπετέλεσεν Ἰεφθαε τὴν εὐχὴν αὐτοῦ ἣν ἠῤῥατο καὶ αὐτὴ οὐκ ἔγνω ἄνδρα καὶ ἐγενήθη εἰς πρόσταγμα ἐν Ἰσραὴλ ⁴⁰ ἐξ ἡμερῶν εἰς ἡμέρας συνεπορεύοντο αἱ θυγατέρες Ἰσραὴλ θρηνεῖν τὴν θυγατέρα Ἰεφθαε τοῦ Γαλααδίτου τέσσαρας ἡμέρας ἐν τῷ ἐνιαυτῷ

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