

Child Sacrifice

Hebrews 11:1,32-34, 12:1 Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. ² The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith. What more can I say? I would run out of time if I told you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Through faith they conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, realized promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ put out raging fires, escaped from the edge of the sword, found strength in weakness, were mighty in war, and routed foreign armies. So then let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, ² and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter.

Judges 11:30-40 ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹ whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." ³² Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands. ³³ He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon. ³⁴ When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break." ³⁶ "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites." 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." ³⁸ "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. ³⁹ After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite tradition ⁴⁰ that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

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After the Hebrew people escaped from Egypt and came to live in the land of Canaan, they formed a loose confederacy of the tribes and called themselves Israel. For a few hundred years they were ruled, not by kings, but by intermittent leaders called judges. The people would become slack in their allegiance to God and get into trouble. God would raise up a judge from among them who would lead them out of their troubles. But gradually, they would forget God and the whole process would be repeated, over and over again. The book of Judges drives home the point that despite the way the Israelites repeatedly fell into sin, God was repeatedly merciful and gracious. As Julian of Norwich put it thousands of years later, "our falling does not hinder [God] from loving us. God is more steadfast in loving us than we are stubborn about sinning. And that is good news! That is fantastic news!"

Even so, the book of Judges is often neglected in the pulpit and in the Sunday School classroom. Bible story books for children may include the story of a judge named Deborah. They're likely to tell the story of Gideon. And they are almost certain to tell the story of Samson, who was fantastically strong - so long as he let his hair remain uncut. But the children's versions will gloss over how it was a woman who led the country, how Gideon repeatedly tested God and then kept the spoils of war and used them unwisely, and it will gloss over Samson's womanizing and other unseemly behavior.

The story of the judge Jephthah is rarely told and it is easy to see why. Jephthah was the son of Gilead and a prostitute. Gilead's legitimate sons drove Jephthah out of the area and denied him any inheritance. In the land of Tob, Jephthah became known as a great leader and warrior. Then, when the Ammonites attacked the Gilead homeland, his brothers begged him to return and defend them. Jephthah agreed to return on the condition that if God granted

him victory over the Ammonites, he would become the sole leader of the people of Gilead. Here, as is so often the case in scripture, the least is becoming the first.

Jephthah begins by trying diplomacy. He reminds the Ammonites of the history of the land and the relationship of the two peoples. He points out that both sides have the right to livelihood and land. But his diplomacy is rejected. Then we are told that the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. This is followed by his making a vow to God. "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹ whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

Jephthah thoroughly defeated the Ammonites. When he came home, his daughter, his only child, dashed out to greet him. He was grief-stricken, but declared that he couldn't break a vow to God. His daughter agreed that he must keep his vow and asked only that she might have a period of two months to go grieve with her friends. After the two months, she returned and her father kept his vow to God.

Do you find this story as repulsive as I do? It was a bad vow to make. It was unnecessary and unfaithful. The Lord's spirit had already come upon Jephthah, so there was no reason to make a rash promise, no reason to bargain for God to be with him in battle. God's spirit had already come upon him. And it was stupid, stupid, stupid! What, or who, did Jephthah think would dash out of the house to greet him when he came home? On the one hand, it wasn't unusual for animals such as sheep, or the family cow or donkey to share the shelter of the house, but Jephthah knows he only has one child, and although she's not mentioned, he may well have had a wife as well. It was unnecessary and stupid to put their lives at risk, and it showed a lack of faith, as well. After the two months of grieving had passed, the text simply says that Jephthah fulfilled his vow and gives no details.

If that was all that was said about Jephthah in scripture, we'd probably just add him to a long list of Israel's leaders who were badly flawed. But Jephthah is praised in the book of Hebrews. He's included in a list of ancestors such as Noah, Abraham, David and Samuel and held up as an example to follow. How can that be? Over and over, the scriptures of the Old Testament condemn the sacrifice of children. How can Jephthah deserve any praise, much less be on the short list of ancestors praised in the book of Hebrews?

Some have commended Jephthah for keeping his promise to God even though it cost him his daughter and cost her her life. Is any vile thing permitted if you work it into a vow to God? Does a promise born of lack of faith combined with human sacrifice somehow add up to virtue and honor? Do two wrongs make a right? Does God require that we keep promises that lead to great sin? Would it not be more honorable for Jephthah to spare the life of an innocent child and bear the consequences of his actions himself, accepting whatever punishment God saw fit to impose? This is a troubling text and it demands more than a superficial reading.

Let's take a closer look at the vow that Jephthah made. Some translations say "whoever" comes out of the door of my house; other translations say "whatever" comes out of the door. Both are correct. We use "who" for people and "what" for animals and things. But the ancient Hebrew word here means both and so translators choose either "whoever" or "whatever." This doesn't change the stupidity and lack of faith behind the promise, but it does illustrate the difficulty in making exact translations.

Burnt offerings to God were male. Yet despite the double unsuitableness of a human female as a burnt offering, Jephthah makes no attempt to redeem his daughter as he was required to do with a firstborn son (Exodus 34:19-20), nor does he attempt to be released from his vow by the high priest (Lev. 27:1-8).

Jephthah's daughter asks permission to go grieve for two months with her friends. Some translations say she will grieve because she will never marry, or cry because she will

never have children. Others are more literal in translation and say that she will weep over her virginity. That seems a bit odd. We would expect her to weep over her death. Why is she not weeping over her death? Hold on to that question for the moment.

Jephthah vowed that “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me . . . will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” He, she, or it will belong to God and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” “And” is a small word, a tiny word, but it can have significant impact. The Hebrew word here is tiny, as well. In fact, it's only a prefix. It is ו and it is pronounced “vav.” Like the example of whatever and whoever, vav has more than one meaning. It often means “and” but sometimes it means “or.” We could translate Jephthah's vow as “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me . . . will be the LORD's, or I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” It will either be dedicated to the Lord or be sacrificed as a burnt offering.

How does this translation fit with what else we know? If Jephthah dedicates his daughter's life to God, he doesn't commit the abomination of human sacrifice. There are other examples of this in the Bible. Samuel was dedicated to God by his mother (1 Samuel 1:10-11). Both men and women could be nazirites (Numbers 6:2 ff). Women served at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Exodus 38:8). Being dedicated to the Lord rather than sacrificed would also explain why his daughter wasn't mourning her impending death. She expresses no fear but mourns her continuing virginity.

It also explains some things that are missing. The book of Judges never shies away from gore and repulsive actions, but there's no mention of her death. The Bible is not usually reticent to point out the sins of even the greatest ancestors such as Abraham, Noah, Moses, and David. But nowhere in scripture is there any condemnation regarding the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter.

I wish I could tell you that I am such a good scholar of ancient Hebrew that I uncovered this alternate way to translate this text. Many scholars have noted that “vav” can mean either “or” or “and.” Either way, Jephthah's vow is foolish, wrong, and unnecessary. He made a vow that caused grief and pain for both him and his daughter. Certainly, all through the centuries, God has called flawed people and used them to accomplish his purposes. But I wonder what it says about us that we tenaciously hang on to the assumption that the daughter went up in smoke. The Bible is too good and too important to be read without thinking about the text. And frankly, it's dangerous to do that. Amen.

Think before speaking.

Think carefully before promising.

When scripture seems to conflict with other scripture,
it's time to study more deeply.