

## Examining Judges 11:29-40

So, I essentially think we have 3 options (maybe more, who knows...):

### 1. Possibly indicates that Jephthah gave her to the tabernacle as a *servant* instead of sacrificing her.

- a. Some understand this to mean that her father committed her to a life of celibacy.<sup>1</sup> The talk of committing her as a virgin, and her mourning her virginity would in this case take the “dying” in an idiomatic metaphorical way—where she loses her “life” and possibility of marrying, mothering, birthing etc. to serve at the tabernacle.
  - i. (this option is unlikely due to syntax—and hints that the vow made, was fulfilled).
- b. The Bible does not explicitly state that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering. Since his daughter was mourning the fact that she would never marry instead of mourning that she was about to die (Judges 11:36-37).
  - i. One commentator writes, “All the earlier commentators and historians accepted that Jephthah actually offered up his daughter as a burnt offering. It was not until the Middle Ages that well-meaning but misguided attempts were made to soften down the plain meaning of the text. The susceptibilities of enlightened minds may well be shocked at such an action, particularly by one of Israel’s judges; but the attempt to commute the sentence of death to one of perpetual virginity cannot be sustained.”<sup>2</sup>
- c. However, again, Judges 11:39 does seem to indicate that he did follow through with the sacrifice: “He did to her as he had vowed.”
  - i. One commentator says: “**Who did with her according to his vow** (v39)—“Nothing can be more express than this statement. In fact, except the natural horror we feel at a human sacrifice, there is nothing to cast the least shade of doubt upon the fact that Jephthah’s daughter was offered up as a burnt offering, in accordance with heathen notions, but, as Josephus says, neither “conformably to the law, nor acceptably to God.” Most of the early Jewish commentators and all the Christian Fathers for ten or eleven centuries (Origen, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Jerome, Augustine) held this view. Luther’s comment is, “Some affirm that he did not sacrifice her, but the text is clear enough.” **She knew**. Rather, *she had known*.”<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Possibly influenced by a syncretistic, pagan religious environment with worship of Baal and Chemosh.

- a. His motives and the form of his vow bear a striking resemblance to many vows inscribed in funerary monuments in Carthage by Punic descendants of the Canaanites/Phoenicians in northern Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical Studies Press, The NET Bible First Edition Notes (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Jdg 11:39.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, [\*Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 7, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 143–144.

<sup>3</sup> H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [\*Judges\*](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 126.

**3. OR, rather than being an example of YHWH demanding sacrifice—it might be an example of rash action and dire consequence (God permitting the actions of men, though he did not ask for or desire the actions or consequences).**

- a. **Human sacrifice would never enter the mind of God—it's not even a consideration.** *We know this in light of other Scriptures (Leviticus 20:1-5 Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; and 32:35).*
- b. **God is not the author of evil or sin.** Blinded by his pagan environment Jephthah made a foul promise. *There is a relationship between what is requested and what is vowed.*
  - i. God permitted Jephthah to experience the consequences of his actions (probably the one I'm most in favor of)—because it shows the sinful effects of syncretistic, pagan influence without completely excluding God as an actor.
  - ii. Matthew 5:33-37 might hint at this concept. Avoid oaths / it wasn't a Godly oath in the first place.

**This is what one author said about his actions potentially being from pagan influence (Ammonites, and pagan gods ((Chemosh, Baal, etc.))):**

"In this instance Jephthah was neither rash nor pious (in the orthodox Yahwistic sense)—he was outrightly pagan. Rather than a sign of spiritual immaturity and folly, like Gideon's ephod, his vow arose from a syncretistic religious environment. In 10:10 the narrator testifies to the fact that at this time the Israelites worshiped Milkom, the Ammonite god, and Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, whose leaders are known to have sacrificed children (2 Kgs 3:27). One should not expect too much from this man, who made a name for himself as a brigand in the hills of Gilead. It is conceivable that in his travels he had many contacts and had learned much from the neighboring/oppressing Ammonites. Indeed his motives and the form of his vow bear a striking resemblance to many vows inscribed in funerary monuments in Carthage by Punic descendants of the Canaanites/Phoenicians in northern Africa. The following votive inscription is typical:

To our lady, to Tanit, the face of *Ba'al* and to our lord, to *Ba'al* Hammon that which was vowed (by) PN son of PN, son of PN because he [the deity] heard his [the dedicant's] voice and blessed him.<sup>4</sup>

"For these people vows to sacrifice children were not rash or impulsive but deadly serious expressions of devotion. Jephthah was so determined to achieve victory over the Ammonites that he was willing to sacrifice his own child to gain a divine guarantee. The clause "whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me" envisages the exuberant welcome by children of a father who has been away on a military campaign. For the moment the reader does not know that Jephthah has only one child, that in putting her at risk he also jeopardizes himself, and that, ironically, in securing his own victory he sentences his lineage to death.

If Jephthah's vow follows the stereotypical form of Israelite vows in general, then the relationship between condition and consequence is quite extraordinary. Whereas other vows exhibit a close link between what is requested and what is vowed, Jephthah's promise to sacrifice whatever would come out of the house to meet him has no connection with the battle against the Ammonites at all. On the analogy of Num 21:2 he should have offered the inhabitants of the cities he would conquer. Instead he would offer the one who should have helped him celebrate a safe return from battle."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is an inscription from L. E. Stager and S. R. Wolff, "Child Sacrifice at Carthage—Religious Rite or Population Control," *BAR* 10/ 1 (1984): 30–51. This quotation is cited from p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 367–368.

**This is a combination of things from *Got Questions and the commentary above*:**

- First, in the Old Testament the phrase “to present as a whole burnt offering,” normally refers to a nonhuman sacrifice. Second, the Old Testament displays an intense abhorrence of human sacrifices. Accordingly, “whatever comes out of the door[s] of my house” should be interpreted broadly to mean anything in Jephthah’s possession that comes out to meet him. By this interpretation Jephthah’s vow may be interpreted like many others: a pious expression adding force to a prayer by making a contract with God.<sup>916</sup>
- Whatever the case, God had specifically forbidden offering human sacrifices, so it was absolutely not God’s desire for Jephthah to sacrifice his daughter (Leviticus 20:1-5). Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; and 32:35 clearly indicate that the idea of human sacrifice has “never even entered God’s mind.”
  - **The account of Jephthah and his daughter serves as an example for us to not make foolish vows or oaths. It should also serve as a warning to make sure any vow we make is something that is not in violation of God’s Word.**

**This was also interesting (writing about the limited knowledge of Jephthah and his daughter, and how she is a noble character in the narrative):**

“The noble character of Jephthah’s daughter has been the theme of poets down through the ages. Anticipating with feminine insight the content of her father’s rash vow before he had divulged it openly, she nevertheless submitted herself immediately to what awaited her. The Lord had granted a great victory over the Ammonites and, if this involved a price, she was prepared to pay it. The pathos of such submissive nobility is enhanced for the modern reader by the realization that human sacrifice is repugnant to the Lord and a virtual contradiction of the love which is central in his character. With no hope of immortality to light the pathway to a childless death she lamented the impending tragedy, but made no attempt to avert it. The incident witnesses to the sacredness of a vow undertaken before the Lord (cf. Num. 30:1ff.; Deut. 23:21, 23) and we must at least respect this man and his daughter who were loyal, at such a cost, to their limited beliefs. There comes the challenge to the modern reader, whose knowledge of God is much greater than that of Jephthah, to offer to him a comparable but enlightened loyalty.”<sup>7</sup>

**Moral of the story:**

- Be cautious of the influence of culture; avoid syncretism.
- But actually, there is a warning here about making rash promises that come from evil influence, and wrong motives, rather than true love and worship for God.

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Isaac Block, [\*Judges, Ruth\*](#), vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 366–367.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, [\*Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 7, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 144.