

Judges 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 11 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah, and Gilead's wife also bore him sons.

And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman. Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tov, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.

After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tov. And they said to Jephthah, Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites.

But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress? And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head. And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, The Lord will be witness between us if we do not do as you say.

[1 : 1 9] So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah. Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?

And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, Because Israel, on coming up from Egypt, took away my land, from the Anon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan. Now therefore restore it peaceably.

Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said to him, Thus says Jephthah, Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, Please let us pass through your land. But the king of Edom would not listen, and they sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Anon.

[2 : 2 5] But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Anon was the boundary of Moab. Israel then sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Ammonites, king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, Please let us pass through your land to our country.

But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. So Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jehaz and fought with Israel. And the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them.

So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Anon to the Jabbok, and from the wilderness to the Jordan.

So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel. And are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh, your God, gives you to possess?

And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess. Now are you any better than Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever contend against Israel?

[3 : 27] Or did he ever go to war with them? While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Uroa and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Anon, three hundred years, why did you not deliver them within that time?

I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The Lord, the judge, decided this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon. But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.

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. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 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 for a burnt offering.

So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand, and he struck them from Uroah to the neighborhood of Minith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-Kerameen, with a great blow.

So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah, and behold his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dancers. She was his only child.

[4 : 44] Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. 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.

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.

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.

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. 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 that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year. The situation at the start of Judges chapter 11 is pretty dire.

[5 : 54] The Ammonites have assembled and have encamped in Gilead, and the Gileadites are looking for someone to lead them in the battle. The Lord seems to have abandoned them to their fate, and there is no judge to go before them.

Chapter 10 then ended with this cliffhanger, and at the beginning of chapter 11 we're introduced to the character of Jephthah. Jephthah was the son of Gilead. Gilead is the name of his father, but also the name of his region.

He seems to be a specific person, but the person also stands for the region that he belongs to. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. His father, Gilead, had been with a strange woman, just as the people in Gilead had been going after strange gods.

Jephthah was hated by his brothers. He was regarded as the son of the prostitute and not a legitimate heir, and they had driven him off. They drove out Jephthah, but they could not drive out the Ammonites.

While Jephthah is in the land of Tov, worthless or empty men gather around him, men described using the same word as those that gathered around Abimelech. However, they may not be entirely bad people.

[6 : 58] You can think of the similarities with David here, in 1 Samuel chapter 22 verses 1 to 2. David departed from there and escaped the cave of Bidolam. And when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him.

And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him, and he became commander over them. And there were with him about 400 men.

The group surrounding are described as empty men. As empty men, they might be wicked and unfaithful, but they might also just be incredibly poor. They might have no standing or status. They

are a rabble with no leader or standing within the wider nation.

The Gileadites summon Jephthah back. They realise that they need a leader, and that Jephthah is the sort of man that could do the trick. The relationship between the people of Gilead and Jephthah, and the relationship between the people of Gilead and the Lord, is not dissimilar.

The people despised the Lord and went after others. The people despised Jephthah and cast him out. And now they want to turn to the Lord, and they want Jephthah, because they're in trouble and they need to be bailed out.

[8 : 05] Jephthah is the one who was despised and rejected, but he becomes their leader when he returns. Jephthah is shrewd with the Gileadites. He expects them to make him their head, if he delivers them from the Ammonites.

The one they had sought to deprive of any inheritance, is now going to be their leader. Before entering into battle with the Ammonites, Jephthah first sends them a message to try and forge some peace.

The Ammonite contention was that the land that they were in had formerly been Ammonite land, but it had been subsequently taken by the Ammonites. The Ammonites had then attacked Israel, and Israel had dispossessed them.

By this point, Israel had lived in that area for almost 300 years, so it was strange for the Ammonites to claim that they had been wrongly treated. They had lost the land before Israel came on the scene, and the Lord had given the land into the hands of the Israelites, by causing the Ammonite kings to attack them.

Jephthah tells the Ammonites to look to their god Chemosh and see what he will do for them. His point here is not that Chemosh is a true god, but if the land is truly theirs, Chemosh should be able to get it for them.

[9 : 10] However, it will be the Lord who will judge in the matter. Jephthah speaks as one who wants peace. He is not trying to make a contention with the Ammonites, but he is resisting their unreasonable demands.

The Ammonites do not heed him, though. And then the spirit comes upon Jephthah, impelling him to act. The spirit leads Jephthah to do three things in succession. He passes through the various territory of the land, he advances towards the Ammonites, and he makes his vow.

Vows are not inappropriate. We have several examples of vows within the scriptures. For instance, in Genesis chapter 28, verses 20 to 22. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.

And this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house. And of all that you give me, I will give a full tenth to you. In Numbers chapter 21, verse 2, And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord, and said, If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction.

And then in 1 Samuel chapter 1, verse 11, And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor will touch his head.

[10 : 36] Jephthah speaks about whatever comes from the doors of his house first to meet him. This would presumably not just be an animal. Jephthah presumably is not thinking about offering some pet to the Lord.

Speaking about whatever comes to meet him suggests most likely a human being. This story has been seen as a horrific one by many. Jephthah, it seems, makes a rash vow, and then offers his daughter, his only child, as a burnt offering to the Lord.

This seems fairly horrific, even in the context of the book of Judges. Perhaps especially so, because this is a man that seems to be faithful. He refers to the Lord on a number of occasions within the chapter, and he also took this vow as the spirit of the Lord came upon him, and as a sort of dedication of his house and himself to the Lord.

Now Jephthah more generally does not seem to be a rash man. The way that he deals with the Gileadites, the way that he deals with the Ammonites, he doesn't rush into battle, he tries to make peace with them first and reason with them.

This is not the action of a rash man. And then there's the fact that the spirit seems to prompt the vow, and it includes a prayer which the Lord answers. Is the Lord playing a sick joke on Jephthah at

this point?

[11 : 49] We have no evidence of human sacrifice being practiced in Israel at this point, and no evidence of human sacrifice practiced in the name of the Lord. There is no mention explicitly of killing her either.

Would the priests at the tabernacle have performed a human sacrifice for the Lord? There seems to be no consequences either, and he continues as a judge. He's mentioned as a man of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 32, and as a man sent by God in 1 Samuel chapter 12 verse 11. All of this seems very strange if he makes this rash vow, and ends up doing the gruesome and evil act of sacrificing his daughter. However, whatever his vow entails, he must honour it.

That is why this is so tragic. He did not envisage that it would be his daughter. Numbers chapter 30 verse 2 speaks of vows. If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word.

He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. It might be worth reflecting first upon why Jephthah makes the vow. Jephthah had been driven out of his inheritance by his brothers, and then he was called back, and he was made the head over the Gileadites on the condition that he drove out the Ammonites.

[13 : 02] He has been promised headship, and he wants to be head, as we see in verse 9. But he wants his headship to be dedicated to and blessed by God. And so, he seems to want to dedicate his house.

The first out of the doors of his house represent the whole house. The first to come out of the doors of the house is also connected with the first to come out of the doors of the womb.

There's a connection in scripture between leaving a house and leaving the womb. What Jephthah seems to hope here is that as he wins this battle, with the aid of the Lord, he will dedicate his house to the Lord.

His house will be established as a house for God's service. And when his house is dedicated, he can start to establish a dynasty. The man who was removed from the inheritance and disowned by his brothers will have children who get the inheritance and lead their brothers.

So the fact that his only child is the one that comes out of the house makes it so tragic. Jephthah is now denied the possibility of setting up a dynasty, of having anyone of his flesh to succeed him in the leadership of the Gileadites.

[14 : 10] The Lord has blessed him in the battle, but the Lord in his providence has denied Jephthah the opportunity of having a dynasty. The ascension, which is translated as burnt offering, need not imply killing.

Animals are killed, but for instance in the case of the Levites, they are dedicated to perpetual tabernacle service in replacement for the firstborn. Someone like Samuel could be dedicated to the Lord, belonging to the Lord.

In Exodus chapter 38 verse 8 we see that there were serving women associated with the tabernacle. They weren't priests, but they would presumably have assisted women with their sacrifices and with some of the rituals that they had to perform.

There were certain cases where human beings were dedicated to the Lord and were put to death. The judgment upon the Canaanites was such a thing. All of their cities were to be destroyed, and they were to be destroyed also.

Leviticus chapter 27 verses 28 to 29 speaks about this. But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the Lord, of anything that he has, whether man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed.

[15 : 16] Every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord. No one devoted, who is to be devoted for destruction from mankind, shall be ransomed. He shall surely be put to death. The Canaanites then fell into that category.

However, although many things devoted to the Lord were entirely destroyed, many were set apart for his perpetual service. The Levites were devoted to the Lord in such a manner. We might also remember that in the rebellion of Korah, as they were burnt up and judged, certain elements that were not destroyed were dedicated to the Lord's service through that judgment.

They became holy to the Lord, were withdrawn from common use, and were dedicated to his service entirely. For wicked persons to be dedicated to the Lord would mean utter destruction. But for a person who was a righteous and faithful member of Israel to be dedicated to the Lord, it could

mean lifelong service, a sort of perpetual Nazarite vow.

In the case of Jephthah's daughter, I believe this would have entailed perpetual service at the tabernacle. As a result of this, she went to mourn her virginity for two months with her companions. Her companions were presumably the young women who would have been her bridesmaids had she been married.

She has to mourn her virginity at this point, because she would not be able to mourn when she was in the Lord's service. Leviticus chapter 21 verses 10 to 12 gives us some indication of this. The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointed oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes.

[16:47] He shall not go in to any dead bodies, nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him.

I am the Lord. When Jephthah carries out his vow, it is said that his daughter had never known a man. It is something that she feels to be tragic, not so much that she has not had sexual relations, but that she has not been able to bear a child.

Verse 40 is parallel to verse 38, and on the surface of it, it might appear to give some weight to the idea that he killed his daughter. However, it can be read differently.

Young's literal translation translates it as follows. From time to time, the daughters of Israel go to talk to the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in a year. Just as after she had dedicated Samuel to the service of the tabernacle, Hannah would go up from time to time to see him and bring him new clothing, so the companions of Jephthah's daughter would go up on occasions to meet her and to speak to her.

We have previously noted the presence of a pattern in the number of heirs that the various judges had. Gideon has 70. Tola has none mentioned. Jaya has 30.

[18:03] Jephthah loses his only heir. Ibsen has 30. Elon has none mentioned. And Abdon has 40 sons and 30 grandsons, summing up to 70.

This is a bookended pattern, or a chiasm, and at the very centre of it is Jephthah, who had wanted to set up a dynasty, and yet been denied the possibility of doing so.

Jephthah finds himself in the position of a eunuch-type figure. He is denied children of his own, and so he must be entirely committed to the kingdom of another. He is not going to build up his own kingdom.

He must serve the kingdom of the Lord. That is the only place where his legacy lies. A question to consider. What are some other occasions in Scripture where the doorway is associated with birth?