

## Jephthah's Rash Vow – Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D.

Volumes have been written on what is generally termed “Jephthah’s rash vow.” In Judges 11:31 we find him saying: “whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house”...“shall surely be the Lord’s, and “I will offer it up for a burnt offering.” Farther along, we read that he: “did with her *according* to his vow” (vs. 39). Thus, the question is: did Jephthah actually sacrifice his daughter.

Those who believe he slew the girl point out that Jephthah’s excessive grief upon seeing his daughter come out of their home to meet him upon his returning from the battle can only be taken as meaning that he did sacrifice her. Moreover, they further offer that human sacrifice was not unknown in that area at the time and add that Jephthah himself was little more than a half heathen. However, the following will demonstrate that these and other such arguments are of no force whatsoever.

To begin with, Jephthah is a type of Christ Jesus in that he was rejected at first by his brothers and the leaders of Israel, only to later become their savior (as was Joseph). Indeed, like Christ will be, Jephthah (and Joseph) was accepted upon his return (i.e., the second time, Judg. 11:9). Like Jesus (and Joseph), he was hated without a cause (Joh. 15:25) and was looked down on as illegitimate due to his mother (Judg. 11:1) – as was implied by the Pharisees regarding Christ (Joh. 8:41).

That brigands gathered to Jephthah in the land of Tob can hardly justify his being labeled a “half heathen.” Did not the discontent come to David at Cave Adullam (1 Sam. 22:1–2) when he fled from Saul? Further, throughout the narrative, Jephthah refers to and calls only on Jehovah – hardly the actions of a “half heathen.” And verse 29 relates that “the Spirit of the LORD came upon” him – “half heathen” indeed. In fact, Jephthah gave abundant evidence that he was well familiar with the history of his people (11:15–26); thus, he would have known of Abraham’s attempt at “offering” up of Isaac (Gen. 22) as well as the previously given Law of Moses wherein Jehovah is also seen to neither approve of nor accept human sacrifices (Lev. 18:21, 20:1–5; Deu. 12:31, 18:10).

Moreover, he said “whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house,” not “whosoever.” Jephthah’s new home at Mizpeh (vs. 34) was less than ten miles from Jogbehah, a major Ammonite city. Such a seasoned warrior would realize he could well lose the battle. It is obvious from the story that Jephthah would have and did, in fact, send his daughter away to safety. This accounts for his saying “whatsoever cometh forth” and “I will offer it” –not “them.” He is saying, in effect, let God choose the offering. Jephthah clearly never expected any human to be inside but rather some animal housed therein during his absence. Now, to his great surprise and dismay, he finds that she has learned of his triumph and returned home before his arrival – indeed, before he considered it safe enough to send for her.

Besides, the burnt offering had to be a *male* animal (Lev. 1:3, 10): humans were not acceptable – and women in particular. In Numbers 8:11–14 we find similar language as in the case before us. There, all the Levite males were said to be offered as an offering to the LORD, but then it is added that, despite the offensive wording, the purpose was to enable them to “execute the service of the LORD,” not that they would be slain. Context is the key here in Numbers and in the Jephthah narrative as well where we read that for two months the girl and her companions “bewailed her virginity,” *not* her death (11:37–38). Moreover, when verse 39 relates that he “did with her *according* to his vow,” the very next statement is “and she knew no man” – it does not say Jephthah put her to death. This can hardly be overemphasized.

Jephthah surely knew that the Lord accepted sacrifices only on the Tabernacle altar (Lev.17:1–9) and only the Levitical priests could offer them. He would have to travel to Shiloh to fulfill his vow (Deu. 16:2, 6, 11, 16), and it is most doubtful that any priest would have offered a human sacrifice on God’s sanctified altar, especially a young girl – victory or no victory. Besides, a burnt offering had to be a male.

A national hero like Jephthah couldn’t easily hide his intentions. The story that Jephthah was going to slay his daughter would undoubtedly have spread quickly among the people during the two-month waiting period (Judg. 11:37–39). Surely, they or the priests would have stopped him along the way to Shiloh (or wherever) and rescued the girl.

Although this was a spiritually dark period in Israel's history, it is still doubtful that the people would have permitted him to slay his daughter in order to fulfill a foolish vow. Later, when Saul was King, his soldiers did not allow him to slay Jonathan when he violated his father's foolish vow (1 Sam. 14:24–46).

But even had he made it safely to Shiloh, any priest could have told him (if he did not already know the passage) that for a small amount of silver he could redeem his daughter (Lev. 27:1–25) from the voluntary vow. There, God revealed that out of gratitude (perhaps for having received some blessing) a man could vow to the LORD a person (himself or family member) or an animal, house, or field. That which was so dedicated became a gift to the priests (Num. 18:14). Since these gifts were not always of use to them, God made provision whereby the person making the vow could redeem that which had been dedicated by paying a sum of money equal to 20% of its determined worth. Surely after routing the Ammonites, Jephthah would have taken far more than enough booty from the enemy than that of the redemption price. Indeed, *release* from a foolish vow or oath on the grounds of repentance accompanied by a sin offering was already given in Leviticus 5:1–6.

As to the degree of Jephthah's distress being an indication that it can only be taken as meaning that he did sacrifice her, it is replied that such grief could simply be his natural response to the fact that such would result in the end of his lineage – well known to be an unimaginable tragedy for middle eastern men. God clearly indicated that the name of even one of His people should not die out (Deu. 25:5–6).

Still, Jephthah did keep as much of the vow as was allowed by the Law of Moses. Much like Hannah dedicated little Samuel to the Lord (1 Sam. 1:11, 22), Jephthah so dedicated his daughter to serve God (Judg. 11:38–40). In so doing, she remained celibate like the women devoted to the temple service who were Nazarites (Exo. 38:8; Num. 6:2; cp. 1 Sam. 2:22 and Anna in Luk. 2:37). Thus, that part of the oath whereby the first that came out of the house would “surely be the LORD's” was honored by Jephthah and his daughter (and done with her hard-to-console consent, vs. 36).

In conclusion, the irrefutable proof that these conclusions are correct is found in Hebrews chapter 11, the chapter containing the “hall of fame” of the Bible's great heroes of faith. There, at verse 32 we find the name “Jephthah,” and that forever settles the matter (cp. 1 Sam. 12:11). Clearly, God would never have led the writer of the Book of Hebrews to place him there had he offered her up as a burnt offering.

For our learning, as well as Jephthah's, God allowed this hero-savior-warrior to fall upon the horns of a dreadful dilemma. There, his faith was tested to the fullest extent. As a result of his knowing God's Word and how He had dealt with His people from the beginning (again, as evidenced from vs. 15–26), Jephthah had seen the Lord's heart. This, coupled with his total commitment to fulfill his vow, allowed Jephthah to find a way to both “get the victory” over the flesh as well as to greatly honor his Sovereign. Therefore, it pleased the Lord to forever engrave “Jephthah” alongside the names of men such as David and Samuel in this chapter of the Book of Hebrews. Selah.