JEPHTHAH'S VOW: VILE OR VIRTUOUS
AN EXPOSITION OF JUDGES 11:29-35

INTRODUCTION

I often have been amazed at the condemnation that has been heaped upon Jephthah for the vow that he made. It has been called hasty and tragic,\(^1\) rash,\(^2\) derived from his “half-heathen background,”\(^3\) “a terrible tragedy,”\(^4\) and an “accommodation to Canaanitish patterns of thought.”\(^5\) The picture is of a man who is half heathen, barbaric, and lacking the decency accorded to civilized man.

Scripture has been more kind to Jephthah than have the commentators. Unless one is to view the telling of the story as an implied condemnation of the vow, Scripture does not contain even a hint of the disapproval so prevalent among those who have written on the subject. In contrast, Scripture portrays Jephthah as a good judge, the best since Othniel,\(^6\) a man rejected by his people who became their savior and ruler, a man of peace who fought only when his offer of peace was ignored, a man of great faith (Hebrews 11:32).

What then is to be made of Jephthah’s vow? Why is it told? What is its relevance to us today? I believe that it sets forth a heartrending example of one of the most fundamental truths of Scripture: the life of faith demands uncompromised obedience irrespective of cost.

Historical and Literary Context

The Setting

The historical date of the event can be established with some confidence. In Judges 11:26, we are told that at the time of the negotiations with Ammon, Israel had occupied Heshbon and Aroer and their villages for 300 years. Heshbon and Aroer were conquered and occupied shortly before the conquest of the land of Canaan, approximately 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt (Numbers 21:24-35; Deuteronomy 2:26-3:12). In 1 Kings 6:1, we find that the 480\(^{th}\) year after the Exodus was the 4\(^{th}\)

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6 Boling, 214.
year of Solomon's reign. Solomon reigned from 970 B.C. to 931 B.C.7 This would date the Exodus in 1446 B.C. And forty years later would be 1406 B.C., the date of the conquest of Palestine. If Heshbon and Aroer were conquered shortly before that event, then a date of 1407 B.C. is a probable date for their occupation. Three hundred years later would bring us to around 1107 B.C., a date approximately 50-60 years before the reign of Saul and possibly near the birth of Samuel.

At this time, Israel was near the end of a lengthy period of judge rule, a period marked by cycles of apostasy and renewal; lapses into idolatry, oppression by enemies, repentance by Israel, deliverance by judges, and restoration by God (Judges 2:11-23). The judges Yahweh raised up were the teachers of the nation, but often the nation did not follow the judges' teachings (Judges 2:17). Great individual freedom prevailed and every one did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

The immediate past history of Israel at the time of Jephthah was one of failure. Following the deliverance by God under the hand of Gideon and his subsequent 40 year rule, the rule of his son Abimelech, the rule of Tola of Issachar, and the rule of Jair of Gilead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh and “He sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the sons of Ammon” (Judges 10:7). The Ammonites afflicted Israel 18 long years so that Israel was “greatly distressed” (Judges 10:8-9). They cried to Yahweh but He told them to cry elsewhere (Judges 10:10-14). Nevertheless, when Yahweh could “bear the misery of Israel no longer” (Judges 10:16), He raised up a great deliverer and judge, a man named Jephthah.

Jephthah

We are introduced to Jephthah with the statement: “Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior” (Judges 11:1). The same description was given by Yahweh of Gideon (Judges 6:12). Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, an ignoble beginning which led his brothers to throw him out of his own home. He fled for his life and lived in Tob where “worthless fellows” gathered to him (Judges 11:2-3, 7). The elders of Gilead, however, recalled Jephthah, when the Ammonites made an incursion toward the land, and asked him to be their chief and to fight against Ammon (Judges 11:6-10). In his response, Jephthah expressly acknowledges that if there was to be any deliverance, it would be the gift of Yahweh.

Upon accepting the challenge to lead Israel against Ammon, Jephthah immediately shows a great grasp of diplomacy as well as Israel's history. He dispatched messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon with messages detailing Israel's acquisition and subsequent 300-year possession of the

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7 Burney gives a calculation of the years of Solomon's reign based on Assyrian chronology. Burney, lii.
disputed land (Judges 11:12-27). Once again, in this chronicle, Jephthah points out that the victories were the gift of Yahweh (Judges 11:21, 23-24). He then calls on Yahweh to judge between the Israelites and the Ammonites (Judges 11:27). This apparently is a reference to Yahweh's role as being the Suzerain, not merely of Israel, but of all the nations.\(^8\) Despite this diplomatic attempt at peace, the king of the sons of Ammon pursued a path of aggression and disregarded Jephthah's message.

The stage was thus set. War was imminent. Two critical events followed. First, the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah. Second, Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh.

After the victory over the Ammonites, Yahweh continued to show favor towards Jephthah by delivering him from his fellow Israelites. Over 42,000 men of Ephraim gathered together to “burn [Jephthah's] house down on [him]” (Judges 12:1). Their plans, however, did not succeed and instead they lost their lives.

While Jephthah's judgeship was brief, six years (Judges 12:7), the amount of text devoted to his story makes him one of the four main characters of the entire book of Judges. He joins the company of Barak and Gideon, the major figures that proceed him in the text, and Samson, the major figure who follows him in the text, as forming the literary highpoints of this era of Israel's history. These four men also are the only men out of the book of Judges who are included in the “hall of faith” (Hebrews 11:32). Jephthah forms a fitting bridge between Barak and Gideon on the one side and Samson on the other. Jephthah demonstrates both the strong faith in Yahweh that initially eluded Barak and Gideon as well as the wholehearted allegiance to Yahweh that eluded Samson. Of this quartet, Jephthah alone is without recorded sin, unless...

OUTLINE OF THE TEXT

I. The Coming of the Spirit  vs. 29
II. The Commitment of the Vow  vs. 30-31
III. The Fulfillment of God's Portion  vs. 32-33
IV. The Costliness of Jephthah's Promise  vs. 34
V. The Faithfulness of Jephthah's Heart  vs. 35

\(^8\) Boling, 209.
EXPOSITION OF THE TEXT

I. The Coming of the Spirit vs. 29

The Placement of the Statement

This portion of Scripture begins with the statement: “Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah...” Being the lead statement in this portion of the text, this becomes important to unlocking the secret of the vow. One view of this event is expressed by Lindsey: “The presence of the Holy Spirit with Old Testament leaders was primarily for the purpose of accomplishing services for God, not specifically for holy living. Thus the presence of the Spirit with Jephthah was not necessarily related to his vow or its fulfillment, recorded in the following verses.”

Fausset takes a similar view in divorcing the presence of the Spirit from the giving of the vow. Such, however, seems to create an unnatural tension in the passage.

First, there is little doubt from the passage that the coming of the Spirit of God was to empower for victory. In Judges 2:16, the judges raised by Yahweh were for the purpose of delivering Israel. That was why God raised them up. Thus, when the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Othniel, he judges Israel and when he went out to war, God gave Cushanrishathaim, King of Mesopotamia, into his hand (Judges 3:10). When the Spirit of Yahweh came on Samson, he killed 30 Philistines (Judges 14:19, and broke the bands of those who tried to capture him (Judges 15:14). One half century after Jephthah, the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Saul empowering him to deliver Israel again from the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11:6).

Assuming therefore that the purpose of the Spirit of Yahweh was to empower for victory, it is interesting to note that God did not place the coming of the Spirit of Yahweh at the beginning of the battle, but rather at the beginning of the entire section. If this statement had been placed at the beginning of the battle and after the vow, then one could argue with some basis that the Spirit of Yahweh was not responsible for the vow. This placement of the statement would still leave us the problem of why did God honor the vow, but that would not be the same as the problem now presenting us. The fact is, however, that the coming of the Spirit was not placed by the narrator at the commencement of the battle, but at the commencement of the enter section. Believing that the very words and order of words chosen in Scripture are divinely inspired, I believe that the coming of the

9 Lindsey, 401.
spirit of Yahweh accordingly overshadows the entirety of the narrative section. There is no indication from the passage that the Spirit came in verse 29, left in verses 30-31, and returned in verses 32-33 to enable Jephthah to gain the victory. Such truly would be a strained interpretation of the passage. Rather, being set in such a prominent place in this passage, the coming of the Spirit seems to signify His presence throughout the passage. Yahweh was about to do a mighty work and He sent His Spirit to His chosen man through whom He would do it.

The Purpose of the Spirit

Second, it is difficult to justify a position that the presence of the Spirit was functional and not in some sense directing or enabling. In Old Testament terms, the “coming” of the Spirit generally signifies something much more than simply His presence. In Numbers 24, the intention of Balaam to curse Israel was thwarted when the Spirit of God “came” upon him and took control of his speech. In 1 Samuel 10:10, the Spirit of God “came” upon Saul and took control of his speech so that he prophesied. Later, in 1 Samuel 19:20-24, the Spirit of God “came” upon and overpowered three sets of messengers sent by Saul to take David as well as Saul himself. The coming of the Spirit not only functionally prevented the messengers and Saul from apprehending David, but the Spirit's presence also reflected itself in their speech. And of course we have instances where the Spirit “came” upon the prophets causing them to prophecy (2 Chronicles 15:1; 2 Chronicles 24:20).

There are instances where the mere presence of the Spirit did not lead to control. Thus, although the Spirit “clothed” Gideon, nevertheless Gideon thereafter doubted (Judges 6:34, 36-40). Saul sinned prior to the removal of God's Spirit from his life. And David, of whom it was said in 1 Samuel 16:13, that the Spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon him, nevertheless, sinned greatly against Yahweh. In confessing his great sin to Yahweh, David pleads with Yahweh not to take the Holy Spirit from him, thus indicating that the Holy Spirit remained present even throughout the period of his sin (Psalm 51:11).

However, generally the “coming” of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of a passage appears to signify some direction of the human life for the duration of that specific visitation. See the discussion of Balaam and Saul, supra. Also illustrating this truth is the life of Samson. In Judges 14:6, the Spirit came upon him and he tore up a lion with his bare hands, a superhuman event evidencing the control of the Spirit. Thereafter, the Spirit came on him again and he slew 30 Philistines (Judges 14:19). The Spirit came on him again and he broke the new ropes with which he had been bound, again a

11 Boling, 207.
supernatural event (Judges 15:14). While Samson committed many sins in between these times, there is no indication that he committed any sins during the times that the Spirit was said to have come upon him.

The coming of the Spirit therefore marks an important key in the proper interpretation of the passage. The placement of the coming of the Spirit of Yahweh at the beginning of the passage appears to signify at a minimum the presence, and very possibly the direction, of the Spirit throughout the passage leading up to the military victory.\footnote{12}

II. The Commitment of the Vow vs. 30-31

The Vow as the Climax of the Narrative

Four major events form the focus of the narrator in telling the story of Jephthah. These events are noted by the length of text devoted to each. The first major event is Jephthah's rejection by his own people and their subsequent request for his leadership (Judges 11:1-11). The second is Jephthah's messages to the king of the sons of Ammon seeking to avert war (Judges 11:12-28). When that offer of peace was rejected, we would naturally assume that the third and climatic event of Jephthah's story would be Yahweh's great deliverance. After all, similar apexes were reached in the accounts of Barak and Deborah and again in the account of Gideon. However, in Jephthah's account, when we get to the apex of the story, we find the deliverance of Yahweh overshadowed by the vow. Anticlimactically, but necessary to establishing the continuing favor of Yahweh, the narrator gives us the fourth major event in the Jephthah story, that of Jephthah's victory over the Ephraimites.

The importance of the vow in the entire narration of the life of Jephthah leads to an inquiry as to Yahweh's view of the vow. First, the text itself never implies that Jephthah's vow was improper. In noting this point, one commentator, although viewing the vow as being a vow of human sacrifice, nevertheless states: "The narrator, … does not seem to hold that such a vow is contrary to the spirit of Yahweh's religion."\footnote{13}

Second, it would be an anomaly of Scripture for a person to fail at the climax of the recorded Biblical narrative and yet be set forth as an example for us to follow. In Hebrews 11:32, Jephthah is set forth as an example of a man of faith. While we may note that most of the persons mentioned in Hebrews 11 failed at various points of their life, none of them failed at the climax. Even Samson

\footnote{12} It appears from the remaining portion of verse 29 that the Spirit is the prompter for Jephthah's movement through Gilead and Manasseh, including Mizpeh of Gildeal to the sons of Ammon. Leon Wood, A Survey of Israel's History (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 223.

\footnote{13} Burney, 320.
succeeds at the climax of his life, although his success led to his own death (Judges 16:28-30). I believe that the favorable treatment Jephthah receives by Scripture leads to an inference that God viewed the climax of Jephthah's life in a positive manner and therefore sets him forth as an example to us.

The Vow as a Cry for Help

Nevertheless, commentators have persisted in painting his vow in a negative light. Some, such as Fausset, have found a problem with the underlying principle behind the vow. With regards to this incident, Fausset states: “Our vows ought to be, not in order to purchase God's favor, but to testify our gratitude.”

The vows of Scripture, however, often are vows expressing to God intense commitment on the part of the person making the vow if God will bring deliverance. Jacob vowed that if God would keep him on his journey, then Yahweh would be his God and he would tithe of everything God gives him (Genesis 28:20-22). God took note of this vow, when He came to Jacob and told him to go back to Palestine (Genesis 31:13). There is no sense of divine disapproval in the vow. Likewise, Israel made a vow in Numbers 21:2 similar to Jephthah's vow: “If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.” Yahweh listened to the vow and brought the deliverance and Israel carried out their promise (Numbers 21:3).

In a vow much closer to the contemporary time of Jephthah, Hannah offered to give up her son to Yahweh if He would indeed give her a son (1 Samuel 1:11). This was certainly a vow made in trouble, yet it was honored by Yahweh and there is no sense of divine disapproval in the vow. The Psalmist states that he would pay those vows which his lips had uttered when he was in distress (Psalm 66:13-14). Vows, much like fasting and/or intense prayer, demonstrate not necessarily a desire to bargain with God, but rather a desire to demonstrate the depth of the perception for the need of divine help. Jephthah's perception of his need for divine help was great. He could not fight the battle himself.

The Vow as a Statement of Trust

Some have criticized Jephthah for leaving to fate the costliness of the vow. Watson states: “We see in his vow a fatalistic strain; he leaves it to chance or fate to determine who shall meet him.” Such, however, unnecessarily maligns the character of Jephthah. It was Jephthah, who in Judges 10:9, recognized that any deliverance would be the gift of Yahweh. It was Jephthah who instructed the king

14 Fausset, 203.
of the sons of Ammon that Yahweh had been the one to drive out the nations before Israel (Judges 11:21-24). Jephthah was the person who invoked Yahweh to be the Judge between Israel and the sons of Ammon. His perception of Yahweh’s hand in the affairs of men leads to the more plausible conclusion that rather than leaving the cost of the vow to fate, he was leaving it to Yahweh. See 2 Samuel 24:14 where David chose to leave the fate of Israel in the hands of Yahweh, accounting Yahweh to be merciful. The vow appears to be a straightforward statement by Jephthah that if Yahweh gave the victory, then Yahweh could choose His price for Jephthah’s obligation under the vow.

Even assuming that Jephthah had no such insight, we nevertheless must conclude that in actuality the cost of the vow was in Yahweh’s hands. The Scriptures are replete with evidence that the events of life are subject to the control of Yahweh. He directs in the affairs of men. Even when men plan evil, Yahweh works it according to His plan (Genesis 50:19-20). It therefore was not fate that determined the price of the vow, but Yahweh.

The Vow Itself
The Petition

What then are the terms of the vow? Scripture gives the vow as follows:

If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be Yahweh’s. [x] I will offer it up as a burnt offering (Judges 11:30-31). (See below for a discussion of “[x].”)

The vow falls easily into two parts and properly may be viewed as a prayer. First, there is the petition or the condition of the vow, “If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand.” While it appears that this was a foregone conclusion, such was not the case at the time the vow was made. For 18 long years Israel had been ravaged by the Ammonites. When Yahweh had spoken last, He stated that He would deliver Israel no more. The fact of Yahweh’s aid in the forthcoming battle, therefore, was contrary to His prior expressed word. There is no record that Jephthah was ever assured of Yahweh’s aid. The fact of God’s aid in the forthcoming battle was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, it was most likely a hope based upon Jephthah’s knowledge of Yahweh’s mercy over the previous 300

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16 There is no indication from the text that Jephthah knew what the narrator knew; that is, that Yahweh had been touched with the repentance of Israel and their continual misery (Judges 10:16). And while the coming of the Spirit may have given notice that God was going to deliver, it is uncertain the extent that the Spirit’s coming was known or understood by Jephthah.

17 In contrast, Gideon was specifically told by Yahweh that Yahweh would go with him (Judges 6:12, 14-16).
years of Israel's history. That Jephthah was willing to act upon that hope is an incredible statement of faith.

The Promise

The real interpretative problems, however, lie not with the condition of the vow, but with Jephthah's promise, the second portion of the vow. His promise that “whatever comes out of the doors of my house...it shall be the Yahweh's, [x] I will offer it up as a burnt offering” has created a great deal of consternation among interpreters. If the condition was met, what was it that Jephthah was promising to do?

What creature was contemplated? One possibility is that Jephthah was contemplating being met by some animal upon his return and that he intended to offer that animal up as a burnt offering to Yahweh. This reading is based on the construction of Iron Age houses so as to accommodate the family's livestock.¹⁸

Several commentators, however, have rejected this interpretation and concluded that Jephthah must have had in mind human beings. Moore states: “That a human victim is intended is, in fact, as plain as words can make it; the language is inapplicable to an animal, and a vow to offer the first sheep or goat that he comes across—not to mention the possibility of an unclean animal—is trivial to absurdity.”¹⁹ The Cambridge Bible states it this way: “There can be little doubt that Jephthah, in his eagerness, had in his mind a human sacrifice. The expression 'that which cometh out of the doors of my house' could hardly have signified an animal. Therefore, Jephthah no doubt had in his mind some one of his household, whom he probably expected would be ready to meet him on his return.”²⁰

The arguments advanced for the position that a person was contemplated may appear persuasive. But as noted by Nathan's parable to David in 2 Samuel 12:2-6 and David's reaction, it was not unknown that an animal might be treated as a member of the family. Such would not be a meaningless sacrifice for anyone who has become attached to an animal. It remains possible that Jephthah contemplated the possibility that Yahweh might want an animal, perhaps the one he held most dear.

¹⁸ Boling, 208 and illustration 8.
¹⁹ George Foot Moord, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 299.
What action was contemplated? An additional interpretative problem concerning Jephthah's vow exists with respect to Jephthah's promised action. Did Jephthah promise to sacrifice the personal greeter, no matter who or what it was? The answer hinges on the Hebrew conjunction “vau,” the “[x]” in the above quoted passage. If that conjunction properly is translated here as “and,” then the recital of Jephthah's story leads to the tragic conclusion that Jephthah offered his daughter as a human sacrifice. This conclusion, however, is not to be favored for the following reasons.

First, it does not accord with the revealed character of Jephthah. The passage does not support a concept that Yahweh raised up a pagan judge. Judges 11:9, 11, 21, 23, 24, 27, 30, 25, and 12:3 all contain indications that Jephthah was no stranger to Yahweh. He did not view Yahweh in the same light as the gods of the nations around him. Although in attempting to persuade the Ammonites to avoid war, he mentioned their god, Chemosh, such an appeal appears more in argument form for purposes of persuasion rather than as indicating Jephthah's belief in Chemosh. To the contrary, at the conclusion of the passage, Jephthah does not appeal to Chemosh and Yahweh to judge between Ammon and Israel, but rather his appeal is to “Yahweh, the Judge,” alone.

Yet, commentators insist on painting Jephthah as ignorant of Yahweh. Lias states:

Hence Jephthah conceives of [Yahweh] as the neighboring nations conceived of their gods. They were accustomed to offer living sacrifices (2 Kings iii.27, xvi.3; Micah vi.7). He thought it only due gratitude to do the same. Jephthah's sincerity was unquestionable, but his ignorance was great. He had rashly vowed, and he believe that Jehovah strictly exacted from him the fulfillment of his vow.21

Lias' view of Jephthah simply does not accord best with the Scriptural references.

Second, at this point in the narrative, Israel is not in the spiritually down part of the judges' cycle (Judges 2:11-19). In contrast to the idolatry which was prevalent when Gideon was called, the religious practice of Israel at the time of Jephthah's call was the worship of Yahweh (Judges 10:16). Israel was in that part of the judges' cycle where the people were spiritually in the right place and Yahweh was preparing to deliver them. With a nation of people serving Yahweh, for Yahweh then to choose a person who was so steeped in paganism that he actually performed human sacrifices seems to go against Yahweh's express purposes for raising up judges. Yahweh states that the judges were the teachers of the people as well as their deliverers (Judges 2:16-18). Yahweh was with the judge all the days of the judges' life (Judges 2:18). Although the judges sometimes sinned, the general character of the judges was loyalty to Yahweh. Such loyalty was particularly true in those situations when it is said

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21 Lias, 149.
that the Spirit of Yahweh had come upon them. In constructing this all together, the narrator in the present text appears to take great care to show us, prior to the narration of the vow, that spiritually things were on the upswing for Israel as a nation and for Jephthah as an individual. Indeed, it was before Yahweh that Jephthah had spoken all of his words, Judges 11:11, and the spirit of Yahweh had come upon Jephthah. To have Jephthah at this time create so great an abomination in the sight of Yahweh as human sacrifice, an abomination that relates directly to the paganism which caused Yahweh in chapter 10 to say that He would deliver Israel no longer, appears to fly in the face of the progression of the passage.

Yahweh has spared no words in describing His total abhorrence of human sacrifice. It is through and through an abomination (Deuteronomy 12:31; 2 Kings 16:3; Jeremiah 32:35). In Deuteronomy 12:31 Yahweh expressly commanded Israel that they were not to worship Yahweh with human sacrifices. In Psalm 106, Yahweh ends a string of grievances against His people with the strong words: “The even sacrificed their sons and daughters to the demons, and shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with the blood...Therefore the anger of Yahweh was kindled against His people, and He abhorred His inheritance” (Psalm 106:35-40). Yahweh further graphically portrays His abhorrence of human sacrifice in Ezekiel 16:20-21: “Moreover, you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me, and you sacrificed them to idols to be devoured. Where your harlotries so small a matter? You slaughtered my children...” Yahweh’s complete abhorrence of human sacrifice provides compelling evidence against an interpretation that would leave Yahweh implicitly honoring that very thing. The silence from Yahweh, if Jephthah’s vow truly involved a human sacrifice, is deafening.

For the aforementioned reasons, I believe that a human sacrifice interpretation is Scripturally disfavored. Such an interpretation should be followed only if the passage compels such an interpretation.

In the present situation, an interpretation of human sacrifice is not required. A conclusion granting greater harmony to the flow of the passage, to the Scriptural portrayal of the judges, to Yahweh’s abhorrence of human sacrifice, and to the honored place of Jephthah himself is readily available without contorting the text. The Hebrew word “vau,” translated “and” in the New American Standard Bible, “can be just as well translated 'or.'”22 With only this change, the vow comes into harmony both with the immediate context as well as with the overall context of Scripture.

22 Merrill, 176; Wood, 224. The conjunction “vau” is the most prevalent conjunction in the Bible, and is used in a variety
The “or” interpretation would lead to a reading that Jephthah contemplated one of two possibilities. The greeter either would be Yahweh's, or the greeter would be offered up as a burnt offering to Yahweh.23 This use of the conjunction “vau” is similar to its use in 1 Chronicles 21:12 where God offered to David three choices for the punishment of his sin. Each of these choices in this verse are separated by the same conjunction “vau.” Clearly, these were not additive, but rather disjunctive choices.

This interpretation gives independent meaning to both of these statements in the vow and voids the unnecessary redundancy which exists with the “and” interpretation. Under this interpretation, Jephthah is leaving Yahweh with the very broad latitude in determining what the cost of the vow would be. If Yahweh granted the victory, then Yahweh could have his choice of any living thing under the control of Jephthah. If Yahweh wanted a burnt sacrifice, then He could cause an animal to be the first creature to greet Jephthah upon His return. If, in contrast, Yahweh wanted a person dedicated for His service, then He could cause that person to be the first to greet Jephthah.24 In that he mentioned first the dedication to Yahweh and second the burnt offering, it appears that Jephthah contemplated the greater likelihood to be that Yahweh's choice would be a person. However, the vow remained open for Yahweh to make the choice. In so doing, Jephthah was expressing both his great trust in Yahweh and, at the same time, demonstrating the extent of his desperate need for the favor of Yahweh.25

This interpretation is in greater harmony with the Scriptural portrayal of Jephthah. The deliberateness of the actions of Jephthah with respect to his negotiations with the Ammonites and with respect to his handling of the Ephraim uprising as well as his willingness to grant his daughter time to bewail her virginity all point to a man not subject to rash decisions.26 As Fausset states; “His other acts of ways, including as a connective conjunction (“and”), an emphatic conjunction (“and that”), an excelling conjunction (“also”), an alternative conjunction (“or”), a contrastive conjunction (“but”), an interrogatory conjunction (raising a question), an additive conjunction (“and also”), a repetitive conjunction (“both...and”), a diverse or distributive conjunction, or a proverbial conjunction (formulating proverbs). Brown, Drivers, Briggs, Gesenius, Hebrew-English Lexicon, Peabody; Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 252-253. For examples of other places the conjunction is rightly translated as “or,” see Genesis 26:11 and Exodus 12:5, 19, 20:10, 17; 21:16, 17; Leviticus 21:14; 22:23, 24; Job 31:13, 16, 26; Proverbs 29:9. Within the book of Judges, the word “vau” carries a disjunctive meaning in Judges 5:8 (“shield or spear”), 13:14 (“may not eat, or drink wine or drink, or eat anything unclean”); 14:3 (“among the daughters of your brothers or among all my people”); and 14:6 (“his father or his mother”). See also Ruth 3:10, written about events during the period of the judges (“whether poor or rich”).

23 In commenting on this, Moore states: “Moses Kimchi interpreted the second clause as an alternative. Shall be consecrated to Yahweh (if unfit for sacrifice, or (if suitable) I will offer it as a burnt offering.” Moore, 300.  
24 That women were dedicated to serve Yahweh at the tabernacle is strongly implied in 1 Samuel 2:22. The women there serving at the doorway of the tent of meeting were most likely contemporaries of Jephthah. 
25 Jacob had a similar experience when he wrestled with the “man.” Jacob realized how desperately he needed the help of god and therefore he clung on until he was blessed (Genesis 32:24-32).  
26 The fact that the daughter was given two months to bewail her virginity also appears to point to the fact that it was not a
were deliberate.” Moore reaches a similar conclusion. To therefore attribute to Jephthah a carefully thought out vow appears to mesh with the Scriptural view of Jephthah.

III. The Fulfillment of God's Portion vs. 32-33

That Yahweh was pleased to honor Jephthah's vow dramatically appears from the passage. Verse 32 tells us that Yahweh gave the sons of Ammon into Jephthah's hand, a literal fulfillment of the condition of the vow which stated: “If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand...” Verse 33 goes beyond to demonstrate that Yahweh not only gave the Ammonites into Jephthah's hand, but He did it in a big way; He did it “indeed.” The Biblical narrator describes the decisiveness of the battle as follows: “And he struck them with a very great slaughter...” Yahweh's gift of total victory to Jephthah, considered in the face of Yahweh's previous statement that He would deliver Israel no more, creates at a minimum a strong inference that He was favorably disposed toward Jephthah's vow. Yahweh had fully carried out the petition which Jephthah requested.

IV. The Costliness of Jephthah's Promise vs. 34

At this juncture, the narrator brings us to that point in the story when the unexpected happens. However, it is the unexpected to the reader, not necessarily to Jephthah. The reaction of Jephthah in verse 35 may not be so much surprise, as it is grief. The price Yahweh placed on the vow was enormous. The story is contained dynamically in the words: “When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him...” She came out in great excitement, with tambourines and with dancing. This was an incredible day for Israel. Their long 18 years of oppression were unbelievably over. And her father was a hero. He not only had been vindicated in the sight of all those who formerly had disdained him, but he also was now exalted to the highest position in the land. There was great reason to celebrate.

The narrator then tells us that this daughter was Jephthah's one and only child. He had no other sons or daughters. The telling implies that this child was precious to Jephthah beyond measure. His response when he saw her (Judges 11:35) together with his simple and yet gracious granting of her request (Judges 11:37-38) further demonstrate the deepness of his feelings toward her.

In this regard, Jephthah joins those who have been required by God to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give up something more precious than their own lives. Failing to see that it was Yahweh who put the price on the vow is a great mistake in its interpretation. Whether consciously or not,

human sacrifice that was contemplated, but rather a life dedicated totally to Yahweh. See, Merrill, 177.
27 Fausset, 204.
28 Moore, 299.
Jephthah had left the price of the vow in Yahweh's hands and Yahweh now puts Jephthah to the ultimate test. Our Lord states it in this way: “[H]e who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37).

V. The Faithfulness of Jephthah's Heart vs. 35

The cost of the vow staggers Jephthah. The text tells us that when he saw her, he tore his clothes and says: “Alas, my daughter!” (Judges 11:35) The word “alas” comes form a word representing a “guttural ejaculation,” “ahh.”29 The tremendous intensity of Jephthah's feelings come pouring out. It is unclear from the passage whether the above words were directed at his daughter or were directed to Yahweh. His statements upon seeing his daughter indicate that the vow was foremost on his mind as he returned home. Most likely he had some anxiety as to the price Yahweh would put on the vow. Upon seeing his daughter, Jephthah may have been speaking to Yahweh the words: “Ahh, [you want] my daughter!” Whether the words were spoken to Yahweh or to his daughter, the passage graphically reveals that the price staggered Jephthah. He states to his daughter: “You have brought me very low”; literally, “You have driven me to my knees.”30 The translation of the New International Version captures this thought: “You have made me miserable and wretched.”31

He next exclaims: “You are among those who trouble me.” This translation rightly has been criticized by the commentators. The idea being set forth is not that his daughter was one of many who troubled him. Rather, his daughter, or rather the appearance of his daughter at this time, was his greatest cause of trouble. The reading of the New American Standard Bible is, in the words of Moore, “feeble and misleading.”32 A more accurate translation would be: “You are the supreme cause of my trouble.”33 The verb used is one of the strongest in the Hebrew language.34 The intensity of the pain felt by Jephthah at this moment must be emphasized. This was not a man who cared little for his daughter. In all of Scripture, there is no more vivid description of the feeling of a father for a daughter.

The Right Choice

29 Boling, 208.
30 Boling, 208.
32 Moore, 301.
33 Burney, 301.
34 Moore, 301.
Now, Jephthah was faced with a choice: to carry out his vow or to break it. Yet, to Jephthah, there appeared to be no choice. His heart was perfectly loyal to Yahweh, no matter the cost. Without interruption, he continues his statement to his daughter with the following words: “I have given my word to Yahweh, and I cannot take it back” (Judges 11:35). His reaction in this situation of great personal unpleasantness places him in a select group of people who triumphed in similar tests given them by Yahweh. Abraham demonstrated the reality of his faith in not withholding Isaac (James 2:21). Hannah joins the ranks of the blessed when she did not withhold Samuel (1 Samuel 1:24-28). And God, Himself, did not spare His own Son, but offered Him up for us all (Romans 8:32).

In contrast, Eli, most likely a contemporary of Jephthah, and a priest who had reason to be more faithful to God, failed when the same test was given to him. Yahweh says of Eli: “[You] honor your sons above Me.” He then concludes: “Those who honor Me I will honor and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed” (1 Samuel 2:29-30). Jephthah certainly does not come down as being lightly esteemed by Yahweh.

Failure to keep a vow to Yahweh would have been sin. Yahweh had stated: “When you make a vow to Yahweh your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and Yahweh your God will surely require it of you” (Deuteronomy 23:21). Although there were provisions for avoiding difficult vows, it is unclear whether those provisions would have been applicable in the present situation (Leviticus 5:4-13). The purpose of vows is not their avoidance, but their fulfillment (Numbers 30). Psalm 76:11 tells us to make vows to Yahweh and to fulfill them. Solomon states it this way: “When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow” (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). In Psalm 15, the question is asked: “Who may dwell on Your holy hill?” The answer comes back: “He who walks with integrity... He swears to his own hurt, and does not change” (Psalm 15:2-4).

Jephthah becomes the premier figure in Scripture for the positive demonstration of this principle. He made a vow at a time of great need based upon a request for Yahweh's deliverance. He left the cost of the vow in Yahweh's hands. The cost set by Yahweh constituted the ultimate sacrifice. Jephthah kept his vow. In doing so, Jephthah demonstrated the unwavering faith that Barak and Gideon lacked and the wholehearted commitment to Yahweh that was absent in Samson.

If his heart was so right with Yahweh, we may wonder why the judgeship of Jephthah was so brief. The answer, I believe, lies in Hebrews 11. Sometimes, with respect to the Old testament saints, Yahweh greatly blessed their physical life in response to their faith (Hebrews 11:33-35). Sometimes,
He did not (Hebrews 11:35-38). His bestowing or withholding blessings did not indicate the extent of their approval before Him (Hebrews 11:39). As stated earlier in that chapter, the true and perfect blessings are yet to come for those who are His saints (Hebrews 11:16). The length of a judge's rule or life, therefore, is not a measure of Yahweh's approval of the life.

A Type of Christ

Jephthah's life has been viewed as a type of Christ. More than any of the other judges, he displays the character of Christ. He was the outcast judge, rejected by his brothers who became the ruler of his people. He gathered a band of vain men to him. Christ gathered publicans and sinners. His attempt to reach a peaceful resolution with the Ammonites reminds us of Christ's proclamation of peace (Ephesians 2:17). The supreme sacrifice made by Jephthah illustrates the supreme sacrifice made by God. The emphasis in the passage on the great sorrow of Jephthah makes us view him as a man of sorrow, a term used of Christ (Isaiah 53:3). The brevity of Jephthah's rule reminds us of the brevity of Christ's earthly ministry. And above all else, Jephthah's total yielding of His will to Yahweh's at the hour of greatest test sets a prototype of the surrender of Christ's will to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. It also sets a standard for us to measure the level of commitment that we have toward God.

SUMMARY

The Scriptural evidence given on the life of Jephthah strongly suggests that his judgeship should be viewed in a positive manner. The prominence of the Spirit's coming, the carefully constructed vow which left to Yahweh the choice as to Jephthah's cost, the great victory, and the uncompromised obedience in face of great cost, all are indicia of a man who pleased Yahweh. That he pleased Yahweh appears to be confirmed by his appearance in Hebrews 11. His life sets an example for us of one whose heart was totally surrendered to the will of God. He passed the supreme test.

35 Fausset, 206-208.
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