

### The Book of Judges

#### Lesson 18 - Chapter 11

The last we met, we read in Judges 11 about the newest Judge, Yiftach (Jephthah in the English) who lived in a place called Gilead (Gilead was on the east side of the Jordan River). He had been driven out of his family home because he was an illegitimate son of his father Gilead, and Gilead's legitimate sons didn't want their inheritance to be jeopardized by having to give an equal portion of it to Jephthah. Even more, Yiftach's mother was a prostitute, thus making Yiftach a social outcast; Gilead's sons did not want such a degrading association within their immediate family.

Yiftach had gone off and created a gang of desert pirates who raided caravans and villages and generally also hired themselves out as mercenaries to rich men and minor potentates in order to make a living. As unsavory as that might seem to us, such a profession wasn't entirely looked down upon in those days, as it would be in more modern times in the Western World. Jephthah would have been viewed as a misbehaving brother, more than a despicable and immoral thug. As could be seen with the earlier story in the book of Judges of the self-appointed king, Avimelech, and the man who would depose him (Ga'al) the creation of these bands of bandits were usual and they weren't at all universally rejected. In fact a certain kind of admiration, akin to that given to Robin Hood, was more the attitude within the Middle Eastern cultures.

The leading men of Gilead regarded Jephthah as a brave and cunning military leader. Thus when the king of Ammon declared war upon the territory of Gilead, these leading men realized that they had no qualified field general to lead their militia and so sought out Yiftach. A contingent of elders from Gilead (some from among Yiftach's own family) came to Yiftach, hat in hand, and offered him the job. Obviously there would have to be something substantial in it for Jephthah if he was going to risk his life to fight for the very people who had despised him and run him off; and that "something substantial" was the guarantee that he would become the leader over all of Gilead.

The agreement was sealed with a covenant and an oath spoken at the Israelite army headquarters in Mitzpah.

Before we read more of Judges 11, let me also remind you of the parallel I drew last week between the cause of this conflict between the King of Ammon and Israel, versus the modern conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The King of Ammon said that he wanted the land that belonged to the Ammonites returned to him; and if Israel would do that peacefully there would be no conflict. The problem is that Ammon never in history held the land that they wanted Israel to give to them: Gilead.

When we look at a map, we see that Ammon-proper lay to the east of the territory that Israel

now held on the Jordan River's east bank. When Israel was on its exodus journey from Egypt to Canaan, it was a powerful tribal nation called the Amorites who ruled over the area that would eventually be called Gilead (as well as the area that Manessah would control). It was the Amorites who attacked Israel and were defeated. Israel recognized Ammon's territorial rights and so generally left it alone; but again, Ammon was located further to the east and wasn't involved in the conflict between the Amorites and Israel. Apparently some Ammonites had lived in the area that was now Gilead, and the King of Ammon was using that as an excuse to declare that Israel had no right to the land they had held since their Exodus from Egypt, over 300 years earlier. Bottom line: Ammon was making a bogus claim for the land of Gilead. Ammon had never in history occupied or ruled over the area of Gilead.

When Yiftach heard that this was their demand, he firmly rebuffed the King of Ammon, told him that his historical facts were in error, and that he had no intention of giving up his land to Ammon.

In our time we see this same thing happening with the Palestinians and Israel; the Palestinians manufacturing a bogus claim and then demanding Israel to comply or they will cause a conflict. Because it is so important, let me state again for the record that prior to 1967 there was NEVER a people called the Palestinians, nor was there ever a nation of the Palestinians **anywhere** (let alone the land of Israel). The Palestinians are simply ex-patriots of various Arab nations who came to Israel (after Israel was reborn as a nation in 1948) to find work; but when the Arab League attacked Israel with their mighty combined armies these Arab workers fled to Jordan en masse expecting to return home to their choice of any former Jewish house that they wanted. Israel beat back their attackers, and of course were not about to allow these Arab workers who were loyal to the Arab League back into Israel. The Arab nations from which these workers came refused to allow these Arab peasants to return to their home nations, so now they were refugees. The strategy was to use these displaced Arabs as pawns to achieve the Arab League's political demands that Israel be turned over to the Arabs and rid of Jews.

Suddenly these so-called Palestinians are an ancient people group who has been expelled from their land that is now occupied by Jews, and the Jews are the bad guys. The media is complicit in this great lie, and the western nations of the world (including the USA) are so interested in maintaining a good enough relationship with the Arabs so that the flow of Middle Eastern oil continues that all are willing to sacrifice Israel to the Palestinians as a peace offering.

The main difference in how this matter was handled between the time of the Judges and now is that Jephthah told the King of Ammon that his demand was ludicrous, that the king was a liar, and that Israel wouldn't give up one square inch even to make peace. Today, the leaders of Israel are simply spineless politicians who want to maintain their jobs, and want to be appreciated and accepted by the Western World, thus they see only compromise and appeasement as the correct path. So it's not a question among modern Israeli leaders of whether to give up Israeli land to the Palestinians; it's only which part of Israel's land and how much and what kind of hollow promises for peace they can get in return.

Turn your Bibles to Judges 11.

### READ JUDGES 11: 29 – end

The first words of verse 29 say that it was only at this point (after Yiftach had been chosen to lead Israel's militia), and after this diplomatic confrontation with the King of Ammon, that the Lord moved and anointed Jephthah as a Shophet. Thus we see the phrase that, "then the spirit of Adonai came upon Yiftach..."

In Hebrew it says that the **Ruach of YHWH hayyah Yiftach**. Back in our study of Judges chapter 3 we discussed that this concept of the spirit of God covering or anointing or coming upon a man (in this case a Judge) was generally expressed using one or the other of two different Hebrew words: **labesh or hayyah**. And these two words represented substantially different ways in which the spirit of the Lord acted upon a human. **Labesh** meant to cloth a person in the Holy Spirit (like putting on a garment) in such a way that the person took on a certain amount of divine power that enabled them to do miraculous deeds, or to gain superhuman strength or insight. But here in Judges 11 it is the word **hayyah** that is used, and it indicates that Yehoveh's spirit overcomes a man in such a way that the man becomes especially obedient to the Lord; or that the Lord's will operates in that man in a way that almost replaces that man's own will. So Yiftach was operating very much in the Lord's will; yet as we will see, obviously not entirely.

Here this move of the holy spirit upon Yiftach represents that moment in which Jephthah's status changed; he went from being a normal run-of-the-mill human leader to a directly divinely appointed Judge for God.

The first thing Yiftach did was to travel through the land Gilead and the tribal territory of Manessah (the ½ of Manessah that was in the Trans-Jordan), and added to the size of the Israelite militia to prepare for the coming battle with the forces of Ammon. Once he did that, he acted in a way that has perplexed and bothered Jews and Christians for centuries: in anticipation of going to war, Yiftach made a vow to the God of Israel; a very rash vow that would cause him the greatest pain.

It is this vow that forms one of the most infamous stories in the entire Bible, and therefore is usually the focus of study of Judges chapter 11. We're going to dissect it pretty carefully; although in some ways I'm not sure how deserving of our time or attention that it actually is, or how theologically significant it is, there is so much controversy about it that it's not possible for me not to address it head-on.

The issue is that to seek God's favor Jephthah vows to Yehoveh to offer as a sacrifice the first thing that walks through his door to greet him as he returns home from battle with Ammon (assuming an Israelite victory). The reason for the vow was Yiftach's recognition of the need for divine intervention because indeed this was going to be Holy War.

In verse 34 we read that Jephthah was victorious and when he arrived home his daughter came out the door to greet him. Jephthah was devastated because he felt he could not go back on his vow to God since God had indeed given Israel victory, so he felt that he was stuck

carrying through with his promise to YHWH. Yiftach saw a direct connection between his vow and the complete victory of Israel over Ammon (whether there was a real connection or not, his ancient oriental mind assumed as much). His daughter made it clear that she understood that her father had no choice and in a selfless gesture told him that he should do to her what it is he vowed. We're told in verse 39 that after a two-month reprieve, her father followed through with his promise to God.

Now of all the issues these few passages bring up, the one that causes the most controversy is whether or not Jephthah actually made a human sacrifice of his daughter, or whether he did something else with her that did not involve her death. And that is what we'll explore.

But first we must set the stage if we're to do more than just use our own sensibilities and opinions and various denominational doctrines as the unequivocal and rigid answer to this dilemma.

Let's start with the nature of the vow itself as stated in verse 31. The usual English rendering of the original Hebrew is that Yiftach vows to God that "WHATEVER comes out of the doors of my house to meet me.....will be offered to Adonai as a burnt offering".

The first keyword of this sentence is "whatever". "Whatever" is a very poor translation that reflects a predisposition of the translator to what he thinks was in Jephthah's mind when he made that vow. The Hebrew word is **asher**, and it decidedly does NOT mean "whatever" or "whatsoever". It means who, which, or that. This is very important because by slightly altering the meaning of the word **asher** to "whatever", it means that ANYTHING that comes out of the door first upon Yiftach's triumphant return home will be sacrificed. It could be an animal or a human. But if we correctly translate **asher** as "whoever" or "whichever", then it points towards that offer of sacrifice being a human; the only question being which human. Obviously the word "what" refers to an "it", and the word "who" refers to a person. We don't call people "it", and we don't call animals "who".

In other words it has become a rather standard Christian apologetic to explain that when Jephthah made that vow to the Lord, what he innocently had in mind is that some kind of an animal would be the first out of the door to greet him and thus he would use that animal as a sacrifice to God. But in addition to the fact that using the term **asher** refers to a person and not an animal, is that even IF it was referring to an animal it is still problematic.

The problem is that clean and unclean animals mingled and lived together in and around Hebrew households. Dogs and chickens lived side by side with sheep, goats and cattle. What is more likely when the master returns home; that a dog would run to greet him first, or that a cow would? Some answer this problem by saying that in a very real sense Yiftach was turning the matter over to Yehoveh; that it was God's will and prerogative to determine WHAT it is that would come through the door first to greet Jephthah, and thus becoming the divine sacrifice. Essentially it would be God doing the choosing of the sacrificial object.

However because the word **asher** is employed, almost certainly no animal (clean or unclean) was being contemplated by Jephthah. The ancient Rabbis say that probably it was a

household slave or servant that Yiftach was envisioning. Indeed in ancient times it WAS the standard protocol for the chief house servant to race to the master when he approached, to be the first to greet him, wash the dust off of his feet, and give him food and drink. That was his job; to fail at that could mean severe punishment because it was considered a great insult to not offer the master such respect.

Another keyword is in the translation concerning the words “burnt offering”. That is that Jephthah said that who or whichever came out of his door he would offer to God as a burnt offering. In fact the Hebrew word used is ‘**Olah**. And we have extensively studied just what an **Olah** is, so I’m not going to go into it deeply today. You can go back and study the Torah Class lessons on the book of Leviticus to gain a more in-depth understanding of the several very specific categories of sacrifices to the Lord, among which the chief one is the ‘**Olah**.

While it is generally correct to define the **Olah** as a burnt offering, in fact it doesn’t necessarily mean the burning up of a sacrifice. It more means a “near offering”. The ‘**Olah** is the offering of a gift to the Lord in order to make yourself (or someone else) acceptable to Him. It is a kind of sacrifice that allows you or another to be declared sufficiently holy to come “near” to God. In general this kind of sacrifice is of animals (scripturally well-defined ritually clean animals), and the ‘**Olah** is presented to God by MEANS of it being burned up on the altar. The point being that the nature of Jephthah’s offering to God was that it was to be a kind of offering that was a gift to God for the purpose of making a person or a nation acceptable to God. Whether it was actually burned up on an altar after it was offered wasn’t technically a requirement of an ‘**Olah**. But let me say it again: the word used in this passage of Judges is ‘**Olah**, so the offer of Jephthah is of a very specific culturally well understood KIND of sacrifice, not just some general offer to give something to God. We’ll get back to that shortly.

Let me be very clear at this point: despite any teaching you may have heard from your Pastor or Rabbi on this subject to the effect that it is simply not possible given all the circumstances that Jephthah made a human sacrifice of his own daughter, there is not a single commentary on this subject ever found or written prior to the Middle Ages that propounded any other outcome than indeed Yiftach made a human blood sacrifice of his child. The Middle Ages were an approximately 1000-year period that began about 500 A.D. and ended about 1500 A.D. It was not until AFTER 500 A.D. that any bible commentator, Christian or Jew, theorized that Jephthah did NOT actually sacrifice his daughter. I don’t know about you, but I think that is highly suspicious in and of itself.

Let me frame this so that you get the picture. Imagine the history and the most significant events of WWII being recorded (which of course is what happened). I think we’d all feel that what was recorded during the actual war, and then what was recorded within a very short time period after the events would represent the most accurate portrayal of what happened, why it happened, what people thought about it, what the consequences were, and so on. Might within a decade or two some new pieces of information add to our understanding? Perhaps. But only to a degree and only on the margins.

Now imagine that in the year 2000, over 50 years after WWII, someone wrote a book and completely redefined the cause of the war, challenged the first hand accounts of certain



significant events, replaced the thoughts of the participants with his own, and modified the chain of events. We call this “re-writing history” and most people with good common sense would have a healthy skepticism that a person who wasn’t even alive at the time of WWII would, some ½ century later, refute the accounts of thousands of individuals from all walks of life who LIVED the WWII nightmare and wrote it down as it happened.

Now further imagine if 300 years passed, and another person wrote a book that said that some of the original accounts of WWII were bogus and his new understanding of what actually happened is the correct one. How would you approach such a book? If you’re like me, I’m not even sure I’d read it because it challenges credulity that a person who lived 3 centuries after WWII; a person who was completely disconnected by time and culture would somehow have a better idea of what happened and why it happened than those who lived during it.

But now what would you do if almost 2000 years after WWII someone came along and said they now have the real truth and it is entirely different than what anyone ever before has stated about the war and all that happened? Well, that’s the case here with Jephthah and the matter of his daughter. From the time of the actual event, and for the next 2000 years, everyone from the author of the book of Judges, to the eyewitnesses, to those who handed the story down from generation to generation, to the commentators who wrote about it from ancient times (Jewish and gentile), all agreed that the account was literal and that indeed Jephthah killed his daughter. It was only after 2 millennia passed that some Rabbis and then some Christians decided that something different happened than what is plainly stated in the text, and what heretofore had been universally recognized as the truth. For me, it’s difficult to take such new theories very seriously especially when the era of agenda driven theologies had become well established by the era of the Middle Ages.

However, I think that it is only appropriate to carry this study a bit further and show you what it is about the biblical passages that caused some commentators to believe that Jephthah did NOT sacrifice his daughter.

There are two main arguments against Jephthah actually sacrificing his child; first is an implication in the wording of the actual scriptural passage, and second is the doctrinal view that God would not permit such a thing to happen and then allow Yiftach to be considered a hero in later books of the Bible.

Depending on your specific English translation, Judges 11: 37 – 40 says that when Yiftach’s unnamed daughter understood that she was the subject of the sacrificial offering in her father’s vow, her piousness was so great that she voluntarily agreed to accept the consequence. But first, she asked if she could have 2 months to go away and mourn because she would die without getting married. Jephthah agreed. Then we’re told that after 2 months she returned and her father did to her what he had vowed and thus she remained a virgin. Further, it says that Israel established a yearly remembrance of this poor girl during which time the women of Israel would “lament” the daughter of Yiftach.

OK. The keyword for this issue is virginity. Beginning sometime after 500 A.D., some commentators decided that this was code for meaning that her sacrifice was not being killed;

rather it was agreeing to remain unmarried and thus a virgin for her entire life as a fulfillment of her father's vow to Yehoveh. Later yet, it was added that she became a worker at the Tabernacle, and that any female Tabernacle worker had to be a virgin. The logic was that indeed this was a great sacrifice because it was considered a terrible thing for a woman of that culture and era to NOT produce children, as it was her main duty in life.

And since the text clearly states that this girl was Jephthah's ONLY child (he had no sons), that whether she was killed or whether she simply remained a virgin, Jephthah effectively had no heirs and thus his family line would end upon his death (or at best upon his daughter's death). And THIS was the cause of his great distress as expressed in verse 35 when he cried out: "Oh no, my daughter! You're breaking my heart. Why must you be the cause of such pain to me? I made a vow to Adonai, and I can't go back on my word".

So here are the main reasons used to defend their position by those who believe that the girl was NOT killed to fulfill her father's vow:

- 1) Jephthah knew the Law of Moses and knew it prohibited human sacrifice so he would not have done it or even contemplated it.
- 2) Jephthah's name appears in Hebrews 11:32 as one of a short list of great people of faith. How could someone who committed a human sacrifice be included in such a list?
- 3) Yiftach had been anointed with the Holy Spirit of God. No one under Holy Spirit guidance could commit such a terrible thing as a human sacrifice.
- 4) There is evidence that there was an order of full-time women workers in the Tabernacle, and they were virgins.
- 5) That we should read into Jephthah's vow to God that IF what came through Yiftach's door was an animal it would become a burnt offering, but if it was a human being that human would be some kind of a vow offering to God by means of their permanent service to God.
- 6) When verse 40 says that every year the women of Israel would go to **lament** Yiftach's daughter for 4 days, in fact the word lament is a bad translation. It should be changed to "praise" her.

I cannot deny that some or all the above are possible. But except for the last point, every other argument is completely subjective. They are people's assumptions; they are their own postulations based on their own morality. The only objectively valid point is the 6th one, where they claim that the word "lament" is an erroneous translation; they're correct. The Hebrew word is ***tanah***. And ***tanah*** in no way means to lament; rather it means to recount, to tell the story again. In fact in later eras, before the bible was fully written down, there were a group of

people called **tannas** whose job it was to memorize the traditions in addition to what had been written down so that they could go retell it accurately to others. They were to be a human library. By translators incorrectly inserting the word “lament” here, the obvious intent was to make the story of Yiftach’s daughter a very sad tale of the girl’s death. Instead, say those who believe it was merely the girl’s perpetual virginity that was at issue, the word should be “praise” (praising her for her faith to the Lord such that she gave up the right of motherhood). But that is also erroneous, but it again tries to characterize the nature of the story retelling to one of admiration (praise) instead of grief (lament). But the word **tanah** is quite neutral and it doesn’t characterize the nature of the story it is only the retelling of it. So strictly from that point of view, it is by no means evidence that the girl was killed or left alive.

So in the end it is up to you. I will tell you that while I fall on the side of the girl being a human sacrifice, I’m not completely closed to the very remote possibility that she simply lived out her life as a virgin.

Now let me offer a couple of other thoughts on this and I think we can move on. I have no doubt that Jephthah never imagined his own daughter would in any way be involved. He may have been a leader of a gang, but the reasoned way he conducted himself with the elders of Gilead who wanted his help, he sought no real revenge on his family, he approached the enemy king of Ammon in a thoughtful way without rushing into battle, and he showed himself to be very concerned that Yehoveh was with him, all indicates that he may have been rough but he was no ignorant thug by nature.

Yes, he made a rash vow. But haven’t we all at one time or another when we were deeply concerned over something, made a promise to God that we either had no real control to keep, or one which we thought better of later on? So that hardly means that he was a rash person.

Those who argue that the book of Hebrews wouldn’t make Jephthah out as a hero if he did such a dastardly and ungodly thing as murdering his own daughter need to consider the great place that King David holds in Bible literature. This is a man said to be “after God’s own heart”. This is a man who was promised the throne of the Kingdom of God forever, and it would be accomplished through Messiah. Yet he committed adultery, murder, fornication, had multiple wives, put the Ark of the Covenant in his personal tent in hopes of gaining personal benefit, and more.

The Lord will show mercy to whom He will show mercy. The Lord will chose to use whom He chooses to use. How we feel about it, or how we judge the criteria of His choice, is utterly irrelevant to the Father. We need to exercise great care in using our personal doctrines based on our modern cultural morays when trying to determine when or if a Bible character merits either the scorn or the admiration assigned to him or her by Holy Scripture.

Jephthah was a very flawed man, operating like all the other Hebrews in that time who were so terribly compromised by evil. He had mixed pagan practices with the Torah, came to all sorts of conclusions about what was proper worship and proper sacrifice that were way off the mark, and yet God used him just as he was for Kingdom purposes. Everything Yiftach did **was not** good. Everything Yiftach did was not in obedience to the **ruach**, the spirit of God; but some



things were. Such is the life of a Believer. We will fail far more than we'll follow God's will as we should. Yet that does not mean that God doesn't love us, or that He'll abandon us. The test is not our perfection; the test is our abiding trust in Yeshua Our Savior.

Yet it IS God's will that we are obedient to Him. It IS God's will that we follow the pure ways and not do as Jephthah and so many others did and pervert God's Word with man's word. We have a guide and a helper to accomplish God's will. The guide is Holy Scripture and the helper is the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray that the Lord will give us the strength and desire to rid ourselves of manmade celebrations and doctrinal pronouncements that are familiar and comfortable but have no basis in truth, and ought to have no place in our lives as followers of the God of Israel. Let us pray that the wonderful things that the Lord has planned for our lives are carried out as Jesus would carry them out as opposed to how Jephthah did them.

We'll start chapter 12 next week.