JEPHATHAH’S SYNCRETISM

AN EXEGESIS OF JUDGES 11:29-40

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2012
INTRODUCTION

The story of Jephthah has long puzzled interpreters, especially given the tragic sacrifice of his daughter and the biblical narrative’s lack of condemnation of such a heinous act. The story of that act is the centerpiece of his entire account, and rightly so. It provides a concrete example of the extreme consequences that sin can have in the life of a believer.

Judges itself is a story about decline. Jephthah’s narrative fits perfectly into and contributes to that narrative. In the paper that follows, attention will first be given to the background and purpose of Judges and Jephthah’s place in the overarching narrative. After a brief consideration of the immediate context, an analysis of Judges 11:29-40 will be given. The analysis is divided into four parts and attempts to show various ways that Jephthah’s (and by extension, Israel’s) misunderstanding of the nature of God had tragic consequences. It will also pay some attention to questions that plague scholars, such as whether or not God prompted Jephthah to make his vow, the vow’s nature, the manner of Jephthah’s daughter’s sacrifice, etc. In the end, it should be clear that Jephthah’s basic problem was syncretism. Understood as such, the text provides some immediate and obvious applications. The conclusion will offer a few thoughts for the reader’s consideration.

CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

Background and Purpose of the Book of Judges

Internal evidence suggests that Judges was written between 1051 B.C. and 1004 B.C., after Saul became king but before David had captured Jerusalem. Given its emphasis on the
importance of righteous leadership and its traditionally close association with Ruth, it was likely composed very early during David’s reign.¹

Several purposes for the book have been suggested. It has been seen as an apologetic for Israel’s monarchy,² as demonstrating God’s willingness to save Israel in spite of Israel,³ an explanation for Israel’s failure to experience abundant blessing in the land,⁴ a polemic against pre-monarchial idolatry,⁵ etc. Given the final verse’s explicit mention of the monarchy, it is difficult to deny that the author had Israel’s king in mind as he penned the work. Yet all of the suggested purposes seem to capture an important idea: a leaderless Israel too easily fell into idolatry; or as Smith puts it, “syncretism was the rule of life as everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes,”⁶ and that syncretism led to repeated judgment and disaster.

The consequences of that idolatry, however, were not limited to Israel’s political misfortunes. As the book progresses, there is a clear degeneration of the value the family and especially in the status of Israel’s women and the effectiveness of male leadership.⁷ When both the male and female characters are studied in relation to one another, one can see that it was the absence of godly leadership in the home first and only then nationally that lead Israel to its miserable state (cf. Judges 17:6; 21:25).⁸ These observations are particularly important given Jephathah’s family problems—those with his parents (his being born of a prostitute), his brothers (his being rejected by them), and with his own daughter (her sacrifice).

_Jephthah among the Judges_

Jephthah was Israel’s eighth judge. The decline one observes in familial relationships and leadership is mirrored in the quality of the judges—Othniel is highly faithful whereas Samson spends his life chasing Philistine women.⁹ Moreover, as the judges can be seen as representative of Israel herself,¹⁰ those who see in the book a pattern of “increasing disintegration”¹¹ are

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certainly correct. Smith provides concrete examples of comparisons among the judges that illustrate this decline:

While Othniel and Samson provide contrasts in marriage, Gideon and Jephthah demonstrate the impact of parents on their children. Compromised lifestyles and foolish commitments resulted in children with twisted aspirations and pagan attachments or they ended the family altogether. The final two stories in the epilogues . . . demonstrate that spiritual failure in the home will ultimately affect the whole nation.\textsuperscript{12}

Jephthah, then, should be seen as part of a trend of deterioration in the quality of the judges, and one should not be surprised to see his family problems as part of that. Given the direct connection between Israel’s sinfulness and their adoption of Canaanite idolatry, Jephthah’s sacrificing his daughter can be seen as “the quintessential symbol of that adoption.”\textsuperscript{13} Janzen sums it up best in saying, “when Israel worships like foreigners, it will act like foreigners.”\textsuperscript{14}

Immediate Context

The apostasy out of which Jephthah arose begins in Judges 10:6. It is worth noting that Israel is described as serving “the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines,” the longest list of offenses recorded in the book, which seems to indicate the depth of the nation’s depravity. This view is confirmed by 10:16. Even after repenting and calling upon Yahweh for help, the text says that “[Yahweh] became impatient over the misery of Israel.”\textsuperscript{15}

Jephthah, being born of a prostitute, had been rejected by his brothers and was now chosen by Yahweh to deliver Israel from the Ammonites. After receiving assurances from them that he would rule over them and an unsuccessful negotiation with the king of the Ammonites, Jephthah takes up arms and the passage under consideration commences.
ANALYSIS OF JUDGES 11:29-40

Syncretism led Jephthah to make a wicked vow (Judges 11:29-33)

The first words of Judges 11:29 present the interpreter with a problem. The text says that “the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah,” as it describes his victory over the Ammonites. Yet verse 30 says, “And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD.” This raises the question of whether the Spirit led Jephthah to make the vow. Though some argue the grammar provides an “out” a simpler observation helps. The text does not explicitly say that the Spirit prompted Jephthah’s vow. In fact, throughout Judges, it is evident that the empowering of the Spirit does not prevent one from making foolish and sinful decisions. Both Gideon and Samson, for instance, were empowered by the Spirit and yet engaged in evil acts: Gideon lapsed into doubt despite and Samson continuously pursued Philistine women.

Moreover, though some argue that Jephthah was trying to bargain with God and therefore made a foolish vow, vows are neither problematic in and of themselves nor is there anything in the text to suggest that Jephthah’s faith was lacking at this point. The real problem seems to be the intended nature of the vow. He promises to offer as a burnt offering (olah) whatever first comes through his door upon his victorious return.

A closer look at the text, however, suggests that Jephthah actually intended his burnt offering to be a human sacrifice. So Chisholm says

The language is the same as in 2 Kings 3:27, which tells how the Moabite king Mesha, in an effort to save himself from the attacking Israelite army, offered his firstborn son as a "burnt sacrifice" (olah). The syntactical construction is the same in both texts: hiphil of 'LH plus a suffixed pronoun functioning as a direct object plus olah functioning as an adverbial accusative.

Not only is the language the same as in 2 Kings, it is very close to the language used to describe Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac. Further grammatical considerations strengthen this
view. The Hebrew *hayyotse esher* is generic enough to mean “whoever” or “whatever,” and indeed the participle is used elsewhere of both inanimate objects (Num 21:13; 32:24) and persons (Jer 5:6; 21:9). Likewise, the infinitive *liqrathi* (“to meet”) can refer to both animals and people (Judg. 14:5; Job 39:21). Yet when *liqrathi* and *hayyotse* are used together, the phrase always refers to persons. Thus, while admitting that an animal could have come through Jephthah’s door first, Chisholm asks, “did animals typically greet returning conquerors? It was far more likely that a woman would greet Jephthah (see 1 Sam. 18:6).”

That *hayyotse esher* should be rendered “whomever” rather than “whatever” also has ancient support. The Septuagint translates the phrase using a masculine form (*ho ekporeuomenos hos*) as does the Vulgate (*quicumque*). It was perhaps this the led Augustine to suggest that Jephthah intended to sacrifice his wife.23, 24

If this reading of the text is correct, then the importance of long standing argument as to whether or not Jephthah’s daughter was really sacrificed or simply devoted to perpetual virginity is significantly reduced. For if he intended a human sacrifice, as it seems he did, then it should not surprise the reader to find he fulfilled his vow even when it was his daughter that he would lose. More will be said below regarding that fulfillment. For now, it is enough to note that, on this view, those interpreters who condemn the vow as rash,25 manipulative,26 self-interested,27 or faithless28 are off the mark, for they all assume that Jephthah at least intended something good. Yet if his intention was human sacrifice, then the vow itself ought to be frankly condemned.

Yet this raises the question as to what would cause him to make such a wicked vow, especially one so directly contrary to the Mosaic Law (cf. Deut. 12:29-31; 18:10). It could not be Jephthah’s ignorance of the Law, since he demonstrates a detailed familiarity with Israel’s history in Judges 11:15-27. The most likely answer is that Jephthah, like many others through both
Judges specifically and Israel’s history generally, was syncretistic in his thinking. Put simply, Jephthah knew what the Law said, but insisted on reading the text in light of what he “knew” to be true in light of the culture in which he lived.29

**Syncretism blinded Jephthah to his own sin (Judges 11:34-35)**

In verses 34-35, the author builds in the reader the joy and excitement of victory, which serves to heighten the despair Jephthah felt as he sees his daughter and the great irony of his own wickedness. Already, the reader is told that twenty cities had been defeated “with a great blow” (11:31). Now the people who had harassed Israel were “subdued.” As the scene shifts to Jephthah’s home, his daughter—having apparently heard the news already (which speaks of the excitement of the people of Israel)—“came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances.”

The reader, aware of the vow, must immediately feel the tension. What should be a joyous occasion has taken a terrifying turn. The author, however, is not content to leave the reader with mere shock. He emphasizes that she was his *only* child, and then repeats the statement in different words, saying, “besides her he had neither son nor daughter.”

The reader, of course, knows precisely who is to blame for the current situation. The fault lies squarely on Jephthah’s shoulders. Jephthah’s own emotional state is clear when he tears his clothes, but his words to his daughter are telling: “You have brought me very low, and *you* have become the cause of great trouble to me.” Thus the interpreter is taken from exhilarating emotional heights to the depth of shock and despair, but then, rather than seeing Jephthah fall down in repentance (as his people had done earlier), he is left confused and wondering how Jephthah could blame his own misfortune on his daughter.
Put simply, Jephthah’s syncretism not only lead him to make a wicked vow, but now it blinded him to his own sin. Presumably, had Jephthah been concerned with obeying God’s Law, seeing the price of his sin would have prompted him to repent. Yet he blames his daughter.

**Syncretism caused Jephthah to mislead and destroy his children** (Judges 11:26-39)

Much of the scholarly attention given to Jephthah’s story has focused on the nature of the sacrifice he made of his daughter. Given the fact that he likely intended a human sacrifice with his initial vow and the actual wording of the text (“[her father] did with her according to his vow,” 11:39b), a strong *prima facie* case exists for taking the text literally. Still, given the horrific nature of human sacrifices, interpreters have long tried to find an alternative understanding, usually suggesting that the daughter was dedicated to perpetual virginity. Even on this view, Jephthah’s sin has dramatic consequences, for his genealogy would end with him.\(^{30}\)

But there are strong reasons for rejecting this alternate view beyond the *prima facie* case. Historically, the midrashic interpretive tradition universally held to a real sacrifice.\(^{31}\) Later commentators were disturbed by the narrator’s lack of condemnation of the act and so sought another view. But such an objection misunderstands the nature of historical narrative. At times, reports may be simple and straightforward, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions.\(^{32}\)

Likewise, the Talmud states the Jephthah’s vow was invalid but still assumes the sacrifice was literal.\(^{33}\) In fact, the perpetual virginity view as suggested by Ibn Ezra (1093-1167 A.D.) only became prominent with the rise of monasticism, which grew in popularity between 1080 and 1170 A.D., which implies it is more likely a result of eiosgesis than sound exegesis.\(^{34,35}\)

Shy, then, of strong arguments in favor of a “spiritual interpretation”—especially when “no exactly corresponding parallelisms can be adduced from the Old Testament in [its] support”\(^{36}\)—the sacrifice ought to be interpreted literally. But given a literal view, scholars have
questioned Jephthah’s understanding of the Law, thereby making his mistake one of ignorance. For if he had known the Law, then (1) he would have never promised a human sacrifice to begin with, or (2) he could have spared his daughter’s life by taking advantage of those provisions that allowed a person to redeem their pledges to God (i.e., Lev. 27:1-7). But on the view suggested above (that he intended a human sacrifice), even knowing the Law’s views on both counts would have not impacted his decision.

More importantly, such questions distract from a simpler and more fundamental issue, that is, whether or not a vow to commit a sin is even valid. Obedience is better than sacrifice (cf. 1 Sam. 15:22), so no matter what view one takes of the vow’s motivation, it is apparent that God would not have expected or required Jephthah to keep it. It was not, then, Jephthah’s ignorance of the Law that brought destruction on his children and ended his family line. Rather, it was his syncretistic belief that God required sacrifice (human sacrifice, no less) rather than obedience to the Torah that wreaked so much havoc.

But just as important is the daughter’s response. The committed Yahwist, reading the text, might expect the daughter to object, seek help, or flee. Instead, she says, “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” (11:36). One should ask what lies under this submission; it should be self-evident that no one is obligated to sin. Indeed, Deut. 6:18 says, “And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD.” It seems Jephthah had passed on his distorted view of God to his daughter, ensuring her destruction. As a result, she actually collaborates in her own death “because she accepts the same foreign (and therefore wrong) assumptions about sacrifice that her father does.” This appears to contribute to
the motif of increasing deterioration so exemplified by the book, for when even judges are passing on tainted theology, it is no wonder future generations fell deeper into sin.

**Syncretism caused Israel to permit and promote tragedy** (Judges 11:39-40)

Verse 40 concludes the story by noting that as a result of the sacrifice, the Israelite women made it a custom to “lament” Jephthah’s daughter each year for four days. Some see this verse merely as an etiological explanation of some unknown feast, but three observations make that view unlikely.

First, the word rendered “lament” by the ESV (*lethannuwoth*) is used elsewhere in Judges only in 5:11, which says: “To the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat (*yethannu*) the righteous triumphs of the LORD, the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel.” This occasion is clearly festive and joyous. The same definition would fit well here, particularly if the Hebrew women came to see Jephthah’s daughter as something of a heroine. Thus Gerstein hypothesizes:

> It is possible that the 'daughters of Israel' see Bat as a heroine. Bat exhibited strength in allowing herself to be sacrificed. . . . A celebration of Bat's heroic qualities could have become institutionalized as a means of celebrating women's ability to wield their own power over their own lives.

While Gerstein’s notion of a “women’s empowerment” type celebration seems entirely too speculative (if not anachronistic), the idea that Jephthah’s daughter could have been memorized for her strength is reasonable. Josephus, for instance, sees her in just such a light, saying that the sacrifice “was not ungrateful to her, since she should die upon occasion of her father's victory, and the liberty of her fellow citizens.”

Second, Jephthah gave his daughter a two month reprieve during which she could mourn her virginity. Two months is plenty of time not only for Jephthah to reconsider his position, but
for others to try to save the girl. 1 Sam. 14:24-46, for instance, records a rash vow made by Saul that would have resulted in the death of Jonathan, but his fellow soldiers intervened and saved his life (1 Sam. 14:25). This at least seems to make Israel complicit in, if not approving of, her death, for there was no (recorded) attempt by friends or family to save her life. Someone should have reminded Jephthah that human sacrifice was forbidden.46 Perhaps the failure was simply due to a failure on Israel’s part to protect the outcasts (Deut. 24-26). Jephthah’s daughter may have had little honor in a country that rejected her father for being born of a prostitute, a possibility consistent with the failures of Israel observed so far.47

Finally, an etiological explanation presumes that the original readers would have known about it or practiced it themselves. Six times in Judges, the phrase “to this day” occurs, always explaining of origin of some particular tradition or event.48 The phrase’s absence here implies that the ceremony had ceased to be practiced before the writing of the book.

But if the verse is not etiological, the question remains as to what connection it has with the rest of the narrative. The best answer, as already implied, is that it shows that Israel herself—specifically the people closely associated with Jephthah’s family in Mizpah—was complicit in the girl’s death. Had the nation not engaged in the same sort of syncretism Jephthah had, someone could or would have intervened. As it stands, the narrator’s silence is deafening and demands an answer. As the victim of a tragic evil calls for help with no one to answer her, his silence echoes theirs, leaving the reader feeling as chilled at the immoral apathy the narrator himself must have felt recounting the story. In other words, if readers are disturbed at the narrator’s lack of condemnation of such a heinous act, how much more should they condemn the silence of Jephthah’s friends and family?
As the narrative moves on to conclude Jephthah’s story, Israel herself can be seen to pay, in a sense, for their silence. For the girl’s death foreshadows the battle with Ephraim in Judges 12 that left tens of thousands dead. So Chisholm says, “The image of Jephthah’s daughter weeping as she walked over the hills (v. 38) foreshadows the nation's weeping during and after the war with Benjamin (20:23, 26; 21:2).”

CONCLUSION

Israel did not suffer punishment throughout Judges because of her ignorance of the Law. Neither did Jephthah. Rather, it came because he, like his countrymen, had a view of God learned from his culture that he chose to adopt, regardless of what Scripture plainly taught. In short, Israel and Jephthah embraced syncretism, and that syncretism had deadly consequences.

Such syncretism is no less dangerous to modern believers. False ideas about God abound and have been embraced many Christians. Books like *The Shack* and *Love Wins*, widely read and celebrated in the Christian community, undermine key biblical doctrines. They certainly have the best of intentions, but if they lure the Church into an apathy and false sense of security, she may find herself like the Israelites who failed to intervene on behalf of Jephthah’s daughter.

All false theologies—the so called health and wealth gospel, liberation theology, the word of faith movement—are built on a basic misunderstanding of the nature of God. That misunderstand does not come from Scripture itself, but from the culture in which the Church lives and ministers. One may ask how Jephthah could ignore the plain words of Scripture regarding human sacrifice, but one may also ask how people today can ignore the plain words of Christ when He said, “Whosoever believes in Me has everlasting life” (John 6:47). Many Christians insist that what Jesus said is not true, for there are those who believe in Christ but who do not have everlasting life on account of their failure to meet some other condition such as
repentance of sin, perseverance in faith, baptism, etc. Sadly, Christian syncretism is alive and well. The Church must commit to understanding God on His own terms rather than on the terms she hopes to see Him. If believers are to have effective ministries for Christ, they must know His standards and act accordingly. Anything less can, and does, result in tragic consequences.
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10 Mary Nyquist, "The Plight of Buchanan's Jephtha: Sacrifice, Sovereignty, and Paternal Power," *Comparative Literature* 60, no. 4 (Fall 2008), 332.


12 Smith, “Part 2,” 436

13 Moshe Reiss, "Jephthah’s Daughter," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Jan. 2009), 59.

14 Janzen, 341.

15 As quotations ESV unless otherwise noted. Some translations, such as the NRSV, offer a more positive translation, suggesting that God could no longer to bear to see His people suffer. Janzen, however, points out that the word in question here (*Qatsar*) always expresses exasperation, never compassion, when it expresses emotion. Janzen, 347.

16 *Abar* in 29d can be taken as a *qatal* disjunctive, making *wayyidar* in 30a to initiate a flashback, with the battle sequences resumed in 32a, where *wayya'abor* is repeated (cf. 29, where the word occurs three times). See Chisholm, 410-11.

17 Cf. David’s sin with Bathsheba.
For example, see Smith, “Part 1,” 292.

Hyman compares Jephthah’s vow to Jacob’s in Genesis 28:20-22, Israel’s in Numbers 21:2, and Hannah’s in 1 Samuel 1:11. See Ronald T. Hyman, “Four acts of vowing in the Bible,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (October 1, 2009): 231-238.

Chisholm, 405.

*weha’alithihu olah* ( Judges 11:31d); cf. *weha’alehusham leolah* (Gen 22:2)

Ibid., 405-406.

*Quaest. in Hept* 7.49.6 ( PL 34:812, CCSL 33:361.954-62)

But see Josephus, who takes the MT to refer to an animal’ account (Ant. 5.7.10).


It is worth remembering that the Ammonites sacrificed their children to their gods.

Smith, “Part 1,” 35.

Joshua Berman, "Medieval monasticism and the evolution of Jewish interpretation to the story of Jephthah’s daughter,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 2 (March 1, 2005), 1.


Reiss, 59.

Ibid., 60.

Berman has demonstrated that the alternative existed at least 100 years earlier in the work of Yaqub al-Qirqisni, a Karaite Jew. But his own writings attest to the fact that it was widely rejected at that time. See Berman, 2-3.


Chisholm, 415.

Block, 377.

Reiss, 59.
40 Janzen, 345.

41 See 1 Sam 22:17-19 for an interesting text in which men disobeyed an evil command out of fear of God.

42 Janzen, 348.

43 In fact, “sing” or “celebrate in song” is the suggested translation by Holladay’s *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 1988).


46 Reiss, 58.


49 Chisholm, 419.

50 Chisholm, 422.