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# Did Jephthah Sacrifice His Daughter?

by Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D., 1975<sup>1</sup>

Edited by David Sielaff, July 2023

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**Would God inspire a man to sacrifice his only daughter as a burnt offering? Would an apostle recommend such an act as an example of faith for others to follow? It is true that Abraham was on the verge of killing his only son to please God, but God stepped in at the last minute to provide a substitute.<sup>2</sup> This should show that God's attitude is against such barbaric practices. Indeed, there is explicit information that God abhors such heathen practices (Deuteronomy 12:29–31).**

[ **Editor's Note:** *The story of Jephthah, a Judge of Israel, goes from Judges 10:6 to 12:7. I recommend you read it in any modern translation in addition to the King James Version. Jephthah is also mentioned in the farewell speech of Samuel, the last Judge of Israel, in 1 Samuel 12:9–11. The apostle Paul also mentions Jephthah in Hebrews 11:33–34 as a hero who acted "**through faith**," trusted God, and led a small group of Israelites to victory over an invading Ammonite army. This article presents excellent examples of how biblical texts can be analyzed and variously interpreted. DWS ]*

## **God Sacrificed His Son!**

It must be admitted that God did allow His only begotten Son to die on a cross as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. God's acceptance of human sacrifice, in the case of Christ is a notable exception to His normal way of objecting to it. After all, God not only allowed Christ to die, that event was planned to occur even before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). But still, one would have to admit that the whole tenor of the Bible is utterly against the offering of a human sacrifice by another human. How thankful we ought to be to know that this is a fact.

This repugnance by God and His prophets to human sacrifice have made some commentators wonder about the case of Jephthah and his daughter. Certainly, when one reads the account in the King James Version, there is hardly any doubt that Jephthah did in fact kill her as a burnt offering to God. But some have noticed

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in 1975 when Dr. Martin was Director of the Foundation For Biblical Research. DWS

<sup>2</sup> See my September 2020 article, "[Human Sacrifice in Scripture](#)." Then read three ASK Commentaries regarding the patriarch Abraham and the events in Genesis 22:1–19. They are: "[Did Abraham Observe the Sabbath?](#)," "[Abraham, Sabbath, and God's Priorities](#)," and especially, "[Abraham's Faith in God's Resurrection Power](#)," DWS

that Paul in the Book of Hebrews used Jephthah as an example of faith for Christians to follow (Hebrews 11:32), and the Old Testament said that Jephthah was under the influence of the Holy Spirit when he accomplished his deeds (Judges 11:29).

These two factors cause some to believe that Jephthah could not have done such a heathenish act while under the influence of the Spirit and acting in the faith of God. Taking this as a starting point, people have made a close inspection of Jephthah's vow itself in the Hebrew language and the context of events surrounding the making of the vow. As a consequence, some commentators have acquitted Jephthah from the act of sacrificing his only daughter. They have arrived at seven points which, to them, show that Jephthah's actions were well within the laws of God and that he did not sacrifice his daughter as many suppose. Let us look at these seven points.

## *Seven Suggested Explanations*

### *Suggestion Number One*

First of all, it should go without question that Jephthah was fully aware of the fact that the God of Israel utterly abhorred any kind of human sacrifice. In place after place in the Bible God showed His contempt for such diabolical customs and had strongly commanded His people not to do such things (Deuteronomy 12:30–31). Consequently, unless Jephthah had the mind of a heathen and was a vile person, it is supposed he would not have expressed such a vow which he knew its fulfillment would have been an abomination to YHWH.

If he did, however, make such a rash vow, which entailed the murder of his only daughter or of someone else who could come forth out of his house, then he was in need of repenting, rather than carrying it to execution! One would have to admit that it is highly unlikely that God would ever bind a person to fulfill a vow which entailed a flagrant violation of God's spiritual laws.

For example, if a person in anger vowed before God to kill his neighbor because of something the neighbor had done, we could reasonably be assured that God would not bind such a rash vow. The person would have to commit murder to fulfill it. It can be said that if a person ever makes a vow which is out of harmony with the laws of God, then that person should repent of such evil and ask God to forgive him for trying to attach God into such an agreement (vow) with him.

One such example of a vow that needed to be repented of is found in the New Testament. We are told that forty Jews vowed before God not to eat anything until they had murdered the apostle Paul (Acts 23:12–14). This was a criminal act on the part of those Jews. Could one believe that God bound such a vow which meant the murder of His apostle to fulfill it? This was a vow **of** which they needed to repent

(Actually, Paul continued to live several years after this vow was made by the forty Jews. If these men did not repent of their rash vow, they must have gotten quite hungry in the meantime.)

Making a vow before God is a serious matter. A person needs to realize the gravity of it, and must be sure that the vow does not entail disobedience to the laws of God. But if a person has made a vow which requires disobedience to God's laws for fulfillment, then repentance of that vow is needed.

### *Suggestion Number Two*

The second suggestion of some commentators that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter is found in the sacrificial system that God commanded Israel to observe. Besides telling Israel that human sacrifices were an abomination to Him, there were only four types of animals that God allowed to be sacrificed, and of these respective animals only those completely without blemish could be offered (Leviticus 1:3).

All burnt offerings had to be males — no female animals were ever allowed for this type of sacrifice (Leviticus 1:3, 10, 15 — notice that the pronouns are masculine in gender). If any other animals were ever sacrificed to God, or indeed, if any blemished or female animals were offered as a burnt offering, it was reckoned as a mark of extreme irreverence to the laws of God. It is assumed that Jephthah should certainly have known the laws of God in regard to the sacrificial system.

It was also important for a priest to officiate at all sacrifices. If Jephthah made such a vow, who helped

him perform the horrid rite? Jephthah himself? Jephthah was certainly no priest. The Law of God specifically said that only priests could legally perform the sacrifice of animals in Israel (Leviticus chapters 1–6).

Some commentators ask this question: How many priests would Jephthah have found in Israel at that time who would go along with him in his flagrant violation of the explicit commandments of God? Can it be assumed that the High Priest was vile and corrupt to allow such a thing? There is no hint in the Scripture that the priesthood was so wicked at this time that it permitted the sacrifice of humans.

Also, the Law of God specifically states that the Tabernacle had been set up as a central place of worship, and ALL sacrifices had to be sacrificed on the Holy Altar of the Tabernacle (Leviticus 17:2–5; Deuteronomy 12:11–15). It was supposed to be illegal to sacrifice them anywhere else.

Did Jephthah bring his daughter into the Tabernacle of God and, after having had a priest ‘sanctify’ her for a burnt offering, sacrifice her on the Holy altar? There is no doubt that such a ritual would have been one of the highest acts of rebellion that could have been done.

### **Suggestion Number Three**

Now comes an important point relative to the vow which those who do not believe that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter hold on to as high proof. The Scripture seems to say in Judges 11:29 that when Jephthah made his vow he was under the influence of the Spirit of YHWH! And true enough, Jephthah was Spirit-led in the activities which he undertook. Some commentators will not countenance for a moment that God’s Spirit would prompt anyone to sacrifice a human being.<sup>3</sup>

This represents a problem for those who feel that he did sacrifice his daughter. It is inconceivable that the influence of God’s Spirit would guide every other holy man or prophet to vehemently denounce human sacrifice, but on this one occasion God inspired just the opposite. God says: **“I change not”** (Malachi 3:6). **“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever** [for the *eons*, Greek] (Hebrews 13:8).

Yet, as stated before, Abraham was told to sacrifice his only son Isaac and the Father certainly allowed Christ to be sacrificed according to a pre-ordained plan. In spite of these facts, it still represents a problem to believe God’s Holy Spirit would prompt Jephthah to utter a vow which entailed the sacrifice of his daughter.

### **Suggestion Number Four**

It is also pointed out that had Jephthah made a vow to sacrifice a human, he would have been exempt from sacrificing his daughter. Jephthah actually said he would vow a male to be YHWH’s, not a female. In Judges 11:31 we read that he vowed **“that whatsoever comes forth”** was to be YHWH’s. However, Jephthah said: **“whatsoever (masculine) comes forth.”** In consequence of this, it is supposed that Jephthah could have disallowed his daughter on the grounds that he vowed a male and not a female.

Whatever the case here, we do find that Jephthah honored his vow by allowing his daughter to fulfill it. Yet, if the vow meant the murdering of his only daughter, could he not have saved her life by appealing to the exactness of the vow? It is thought by some that this alone would block the necessity of Jephthah sacrificing his daughter.

### **What Did Jephthah Vow?**

Those who believe Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter, see a two-fold division to Jephthah’s vow. Notice their translation: **“It shall be that whosoever (masculine) comes forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, shall surely be YHWH’s: and I will offer Him (God) a burnt offering”** (Judges 11:31). Notice the two things that Jephthah said he would do in this rendering. It is supposed

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<sup>3</sup> Jephthah’s act would have occurred long after the example of Abraham being stopped from sacrificing his **“only begotten son”** Isaac, as Paul tells us in Hebrews 11:17:

**“By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his ONLY begotten son.” DWS**

that he would allow a human to become YHWH's, and secondly, he would offer an ordinary animal sacrifice to God as a burnt offering.

### ***Devoting A Child To God***

In Bible times it was a custom, from time to time, for parents to devote their children to God to be used of Him in full time service in the Tabernacle or Temple. Such an example is prophet Samuel. We find that Hannah, Samuel's mother, wanted a child so much that she made a vow to give the child to God for his perpetual service, if God would allow her to have a baby. We are all familiar with the narrative. Hannah got her child, and she in turn devoted him to God by giving up her personal ownership of Samuel.

For those who advocate Jephthah's non-sacrifice of his daughter, they call attention to the similarity of the two vows — one by Hannah and the other by Jephthah. Notice the two in detail. First Hannah's:

**“And she vowed a vow, and said,**

**‘O YHWH of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your handmaid, and remember me, and not forget your handmaid, but wilt give unto your handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto YHWH all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.’”**

• **1 Samuel 1:11**

Now note what Jephthah vowed:

**“And Jephthah vowed a vow unto YHWH, and said,**

**‘If you shall without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever comes forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be YHWH's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.’”**

• **Judges 11:30–31**

These two vows do resemble each other. We are then asked the question: Did Hannah sacrifice Samuel as a burnt offering immediately after he was born? No, Hannah's vow had nothing to do with the sacrifice of a human. She simply vowed that Samuel would be YHWH's — that he would belong to Him and was to always remain in YHWH's service.

What then could such a vow involve for Jephthah's daughter? We know that Samuel became the last judge, a prophet, and statesman in Israel, fulfilling Hannah's vow. What could this young girl have done if Jephthah had been making a similar vow to Hannah's?

There is a later example of a woman who likewise devoted her life to the service of God while still a young woman. This woman was Anna, the prophetess, who was honored of God by being able to see Christ right after His birth (Luke 2:36–38). It is said of Anna that **“she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the Temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day”** (Luke 2:37).

It is true that Jephthah's daughter could have done something similar to the service of Anna. If this is the proper interpretation, she would have lived the rest of her life in or near the Tabernacle and served God night and day. At any rate, we are told by the group which holds the non-sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, that the vow that Jephthah made, only concerned the handing over of a person to the continual service of God — the person **“shall surely be YHWH's.”** They feel it had nothing to do with killing the person.

The above information will prepare us for number five, a suggestion that proves to some that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter.

### ***Suggestion Number Five***

We have in the Bible almost a whole chapter which deals with the question of vows — Leviticus chapter 27. This chapter deals in particular with vows concerning the Old Testament practice of devoting the children

or family to the service of God — as did Hannah. The crucial point one needs to notice is the fact that God allowed even a way of escape from performing the physical duties that would be incurred from such vows.

God allowed people to pay a certain amount of redemption money to the sanctuary treasury instead of a person contributing his or her time to duties within or around the sanctuary. In other words, if a vow had been made for a man to be devoted to the service of God for one year, and the person did not wish to do the physical work involved at the sanctuary, then a man between the ages of 20 and 60 could pay 50 shekels and be relieved of performing the vow (Leviticus 27:1–3). For a female in the same age group, the redemption money was only 30 shekels because she would not be able to perform as many physical duties as the man (Leviticus 27:4).

What does this all mean for our present question? Some interpreters feel that Jephthah could have paid the 30 shekels and his daughter would have been free from performing any vow of devotion to the continual service of God. Of course, neither Jephthah nor his daughter bought her way out of the vow. It was fulfilled.

Still, on the other hand we are told by some that had Jephthah vowed to murder his only daughter to fulfill his rash vow, then he would surely have paid the redemption money, which, in Old Testament times seems to have been allowable. Though it must be admitted that the question of vowing and redeeming in the Old Testament period is not one which we in our modern age clearly understand, yet it certainly seems possible that such a redemption would have been legal in the case of Jephthah.

### **Suggestion Number Six**

Another interesting piece of evidence is offered by those who feel that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter. This concerns the actual vow that Jephthah made. The vow is supposed to involve something more than performing a lifelong duty in the Tabernacle. It is felt the vow entailed a promise of perpetual virginity for the person who would come from Jephthah's house. We are told that Jephthah rent [tore apart] his clothes and was very sorrowful when he saw his only daughter come forth from the house to meet him. As a consequence of his vow, we know that Jephthah's daughter went up and down the land of Israel for two months bewailing her virginity:

**“And she said unto him,**

**‘My father, if you have opened your mouth unto YHWH, do to me according to that which has proceeded out of your mouth; forasmuch as YHWH has taken vengeance for you of your enemies, even of the children of Ammon.’**

**And she said unto her father,**

**‘Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows.’**

**And he said, ‘Go.’ And he sent her away for two months: and she went with her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains.”**

**• Judges 11:36–38**

Does this mean that his daughter had to remain a perpetual virgin — she could not marry and rear up children, rather than bewailing her forthcoming death as a human sacrifice? Notice Judges 11:39:

**“And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and SHE KNEW NO MAN.**

**And it was a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.”**

**• Judges 11:39–40**

Some feel the vow included a stipulation that the vowed person was to remain in a perpetual state of virginity. If this is true, one could understand why Jephthah grieved over the vow because she was his only child. This meant that Jephthah's family would cease to exist in Israel. He would never have any descendants.

Perhaps Jephthah expected either one of the doorkeepers, a manservant or maidservant to come forth to

meet him. He never suspected that it would be his only daughter. Yet, Jephthah, with the agreement of his daughter, fulfilled the vow.

### **Suggestion Number Seven**

The final suggestion is held as one of the strongest of all for showing that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter. Here again, this involves an understanding of the Hebrew. Using the marginal reference in verse 39 of the chapter, we arrive at the following rendering:

**“And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly TO TALK WITH the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.”**

• *Judges 11:40).*

This would mean, if so interpreted, that the women went up every year and talked with her, they consoled her because of her having to be a perpetual virgin.

However, it must be pointed out that this usage is a marginal reading. The most natural rendering is “to celebrate or rehearse in praises.” It is clearly stretching the meaning to say the word means “to talk with.”

There is one point in its favor, however. Note that the Bible says that it was (not is) a custom in Israel for the women to rehearse or talk with Jephthah’s daughter four days in the year. Of course, if the custom was simply to talk with her — to console her — the custom would necessarily have ceased with the natural death of Jephthah’s daughter, for there would be no one to talk with after her death.

And true enough, this custom must have ceased when Jephthah’s daughter died, for we have no record in any of the later history of Israel showing this custom continuing. If, however, this ceremony was to commemorate year after year the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, then we reasonably ought to find some record of it being observed at a later time for there would be no reason to stop its observance. This fact does give a little worth to the rendering **“to talk with”** though it is not of sufficient weight for any dogmatism over the matter.

### **Conclusion**

We now have seen the evidence in favor of Jephthah not sacrificing his daughter. But despite what looks like a reasonable case for our acceptance of it, there remain major problems in doing so. For one thing, it is stretching the Hebrew to extreme limits of interpretation. It is like squeezing the last ounce of juice out of an orange. Or better yet, it is like a man with a size eight foot trying to wear a size six shoe. It might be barely possible to do it, but it would give a constantly painful walk. However, the reading of the Hebrew in its most natural sense (that Jephthah did in fact vow to sacrifice a human), one is left with the definite impression that we have a size eight foot in a size eight shoe.

Besides, the vast majority of commentators of ancient and modern times (even those who should have had a strong tendency to get Jephthah “off the hook”), had to acknowledge that the simple reading of the Hebrew supports Jephthah having sacrificed his daughter after all. And though I personally have wanted to believe the other interpretation (haven’t most people?), and knowing that the sacrifice of his daughter is a horrible conclusion, it is still the one which seems impossible to avoid.

- But Jephthah was **“in the Spirit of the Lord”**! True, he was in the Spirit when he went on his journey to Gilead, Manasseh, Mizpeh, and Ammon, but the text does not demand that he was still in that Spirit when the vow was made. We must be careful here.
- But Jephthah vowed regarding a male, not a female! True, but he still subjected his daughter to fulfill the vow no matter what it entailed.
- But Paul called Jephthah a man of faith (Hebrews 11:32). True, he was, but does Paul mean Jephthah was faithful in all he did? Paul in Hebrews chapter 11 records the deeds of others which showed their faiths in their actions, but in Jephthah’s case he left out all details. [ Editor’s Note: Paul in Hebrews

11:32 did not list the heroes of the faith in chronological order, which was: Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Samuel, and David. Not all the heroes were listed. DWS ]

Indeed, even David was called by God **“a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfill all my will”** (Acts 13:22). But does this mean that David was a man who was constantly within the will of God? Why David clearly went against that will when he numbered Israel (2 Samuel 24:1–25), and God was certainly not pleased with David when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, and later when David as a consequence murdered Uriah. These were times of serious faults of David, yet God’s general appraisal of him was good.

So, it must have been with Jephthah. The man made a dreadful vow (no matter if it were to perpetual virginity or death) regarding the life of someone else. Had the vow concerned him alone, it might not have been so bad, but he involved an innocent person and without the person’s knowledge.

### **What Was Learned?**

What is the objective lesson in this event with Jephthah? Why is it recorded in the Bible? It was put there to make sure that none of us would repeat such nonsensical vows. The results can be disastrous.

There is also one other point that we need to learn from the story. Though it is a revolting episode, let us not try to redeem a personage of the Bible from ghastly deeds by stretching the Hebrew (or Greek) to make it agree with what we would like to believe. There are too many people doing this with God’s word (I have even done it in the past) and what a hodge-podge they come up with.

Hopefully, there is a slight chance that Jephthah did not after all sacrifice his daughter (it would be a beautiful thing if this were in fact the truth), but it appears better that we learn the lesson of not allowing “the last drop” which is squeezed from the orange to be our sole guide in giving the proper interpretation of the Bible and assign the other one hundred “drops” as being of no consequence. This never pays!

Ernest L. Martin, 1975

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### **Addendum by David Sielaff**

The quote below is in accord with Dr. Martin’s conclusion:

**“All the earlier commentators and historians accepted that Jephthah actually offered up his daughter as a burnt offering. It was not until the Middle Ages that well-meaning but misguided attempts were made to soften down the plain meaning of the text. The susceptibilities of enlightened minds may well be shocked at such an action, particularly by one of Israel’s judges; but the attempt to commute the sentence of death to one of perpetual virginity cannot be sustained.**

**The final reference to the virginity of Jephthah’s daughter is added to point [to] the tragedy of the affair and the perfect tense is best read as a pluperfect, a use which it often has in Hebrew, ‘she had known no man’ (cf. RSV, “She had never known a man”). The plain statement, that he did with her according to his vow which he had vowed, must be allowed to stand.**

[1] **The desolation of Jephthah** ([Judges 11:]35),

[2] **the two-month reprieve** ([verses] 37, 38), and

[3] **the institution of an annual four-day feast**

**would hardly be likely if nothing more was involved than perpetual virginity.”<sup>4</sup>**

[Emphasis mine, DWS]

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 143–144. DWS