

Judges 10-12

Lesson 5 2013 Series 1

This section constitutes a complex set of materials that deal with the troubled and troubling career of the Gileadite judge Jephthah. This section is framed on either side by the list of “minor judges (10:1-5 and 12:8-15). There is a restatement of the historical framework of the Book of Judges 10:6-16 coupled with the Gileadite leadership’s statement of their need for a military commander (10:17-18).¹ This story is a very disturbing story for a number of reasons, but primarily because of the issue of human sacrifice that it raises and does not appear to have been punished, at least on the surface by God and Jephthah is touted in the book as a hero.

The story of Jephthah begins with the cry of the Israelites to Yahweh stating their sin before God, which primarily consists of abandoning God and worshipping the Baals (verse 10). The response of God, and we are not told

¹ Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2012), p. 113.

² A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with*

how God made this response, is to remind them of what he did in the past. He reminds them that he delivered them from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites, and the Maonites. These are all peoples that had oppressed Israel at some point or another and also it should be pointed out that in each instance Israel cried out to God for deliverance (verse 12). God demonstrates his faithfulness by each time answering the call of his people. He reminds them of his faithfulness and this is contrasted with the faithlessness of the people who have abandoned God for the other gods (verse 13).

The response of God in this instance is to challenge Israel to go and cry to the gods that they have “chosen”. This is likely an attempt on the part of God to truly call his people to genuine repentance. At verse 15 you have the response of Israel that expresses a level of genuineness in their plea to God. They repeat again their statement that they have “sinned”, and they go beyond this first step in repentance, which is the confession of sin, and move beyond

this, to the abandonment of the evil and a turning to the ways of righteousness.²

This turning from their evil is demonstrated in verse 16 with the putting away of their foreign gods and the worshipping of Yahweh. It is at this point that Yahweh can “no longer bear to see Israel suffer”. The language here is very intensive with the sense being more clearly defined by the New English Translation: “Finally the LORD **grew tired** of seeing Israel suffer **so much**”.³ At verses 6-9 the Ammonites had been introduced as one of the two foes that were used by God to punish his unfaithful people and thus the stage is prepared for the introduction of Israel’s next judge. These verses intimate that the response of Yahweh to the confession of Israel was to let the Ammonite army attack Israel in Gilead, the stronghold of the last judge (verse 4).⁴

Chapter 11 begins with an introduction to Jephthah, who is described first of all as a Gileadite. The exact

² A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1982), p. 249.

³ Biblical Studies Press. (2006). *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Jdg 10:16). Biblical Studies Press.

⁴ Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 267.

meaning of this designation is somewhat unclear in relation to the fact that later on the text indicates that the father of Jephthah is Gilead. Normally, this is the name of a location in the land, or the descendants of (Judges 5:17; 10:18; 1 Samuel 13:7; 2 Samuel 2:9) Gilead the son of Machir (Numbers 26:29; 36:1; 2 Chronicles 2:21, 23).⁵

It is possible that the text here intends to tell us that the father of Jephthah is unknown or that he failed to accept that he was the father. His mother is a prostitute and his father is named as Gilead, which is possibly meant to indicate the region rather than a particular individual.⁶ The intent would then be that the father is unknown. This section indicates that one positive aspect of Jephthah is that he is a Gileadite. After this, we are told the main reason for him being considered as someone to lead Israel and that is that he is a mighty warrior (גִּבּוֹר חַיִּל). It should be noted that I have followed the Hebrew ordering of things here and

⁵ M. Patrick Graham, "Gilead (Person)", in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 1019-1020.

⁶ C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges: with Introduction and Notes* (London: Rivingtons, 1918), p. 308. Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, in the Anchor Bible series, vol. 6A (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1975), p. 197. Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, in The Overtures to Biblical Theology series (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 94.

not the English order, which is altered. The text then shifts to the negative aspects of Jephthah, which are that his mother is a prostitute and possibly the indication is that his father is unknown.

Verse 2 then shifts to telling us that “Gilead’s wife”, someone other than Jephthah’s mother, had sons that drove Jephthah away when they grew up. This was an illegal act on the part of the sons as the law indicates that the son of a concubine had a share in the inheritance. This part of the narrative would seem to indicate that indeed the father of Jephthah was known. At verse 3 we are told that Jephthah fled from his seventy brothers and lives in the land of “Tob” (In Hebrew this word means “Good”). Jewish commentators regard this appellation as indicative of the name of the lord of the land. This name is also mentioned at 2 Samuel 10:6, 8.⁷ “Outlaws”, vain or empty (אֲנָשִׁים רִיקִים) men collected around Jephthah and went “raiding” with him. This was how they made their living; they were, by occupation,

⁷ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 250.

raiders. In some ways this seems like an unlikely place to look for either deliverers or heroes.

Verse 5, when the Ammonites become a problem for Israel they seek out Jephthah to bring him from the land of Tob. They invite him to be their commander (verse 6), but he retorts to them that they are the ones who drove him out and rejected him (verse 7). Perhaps this could be additional evidence to indicate that the father of Jephthah was unknown, as he accuses the elders of Gilead of being involved in driving him from Gilead. In that instance the seventy sons of Gilead would represent, in some symbolic fashion, the leaders of Gilead. He questions them further but they plead with him to become “head” over them (verse 8). At this point (verse 9) Jephthah demonstrates that not only is he a mighty warrior, but also he is a shrewd politician as he draws Yahweh into the negotiations that he is making with the elders. At verse 10 the “elders of Gilead” acknowledge that Yahweh will stand as witness between them to make Jephthah their head if he is victorious over

the Ammonites. They accept his terms in the agreement and they call upon Yahweh as a witness of their pledge.

Verse 11, at this point Jephthah goes with the elders of Gilead and he is made head over them. This is before his victory over the Ammonites. At Mizpah Jephthah, “spoke all his words” before the Lord. This was undoubtedly in order to give religious sanction to the agreement he had made with the elders.⁸ Jephthah then sent messengers to ask what the dispute was between Israel and the Ammonites (verse 12). The king of the Ammonites, who is not named here, responds that he wants the land back that Israel took at the end of the exodus from Egypt (verse 13) from his people.

Jephthah responds by sending messengers once again to the king of the Ammonites, this time with an indication that the land he is referring to was given to Israel by God when the Amorites fought against Israel. He indicates that the land the Ammonites are claiming did not belong to them at that time and that Yahweh has given this land, through

⁸ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 252.

the conquest to Israel (verse 23). Jephthah then goes on to ask them if their god Chemosh gave them land, would they not possess it (verse 24)? In some ways this indicates that if this is really their land then their god would give it to them and if he has not, perhaps it is because he is too weak to do so? This language is reminiscent of the reasoning used by Gideon's father in the incident with Baal. The reasoning here then goes on to bring Yahweh into this conflict and to reason that if Yahweh conquered it for Israel they should possess it.

Jephthah then goes on to recount the story of Balak and to indicate that he knew better than to enter into conflict with Israel. He also goes on to indicate that their claim is more than three hundred years old and he questions why he is just now making the claim. At verse 27 Jephthah accuses the king of the Ammonites of sinning against Jephthah and he calls upon Yahweh to judge between the two parties. The indication is clear, and that is that the Ammonites did not pay attention to the words of Jephthah (verse 28).

Verse 29 begins with a somewhat startling statement, as we are told that the “spirit of Yahweh” came upon Jephthah and he proceeds to the Ammonites. It is at this point that one might expect for Jephthah to be at his most heroic with the spirit of Yahweh upon him, but for some reason he deems it worthwhile at this point to make a vow. He seems not to have taken the fact that spirit of Yahweh came upon him as an indication that he will be granted victory. Jephthah, at this point, makes a foolish promise seeking to bargain with God. This seems doubly foolish in light of the fact that the previous verse indicates that the “spirit of Yahweh” had come upon him and now he is trying to bargain with God.

So serious are the words of Jephthah in making this agreement that the narrator indicates that he “vowed a vow to Yahweh” (verse 30). The chosen savior, endowed with the presence of the “spirit of Yahweh” is still unsure and faithless in this instance. He makes this rash vow intending to offer “whatever” or “whoever” comes out the door to

Yahweh as a burnt offering in exchange for a victory over the Ammonites.⁹

There is a certain vagueness in the words of Jephthah and despite our temptation to clarify, the vagueness of the text should be left as it is. He has no idea what might come out the door, or who.¹⁰ In his rash desire to address the problem currently before him Jephthah fails to weigh the future potential consequences of his actions and abandons prudence. This will prove to be a costly error in judgment and some might question why God grants victory to Israel in this instance and especially through the hand of Jephthah who appears to be both faithless and shortsighted.

In the words and actions of Jephthah we hear not words of courage, but of doubt, and not an act of faith, but an act of faithlessness, and not trust in God, but to efforts to manipulate and control God. This episode does not indicate courage in the face of adversity, but cowardice.¹¹ Armed with the courage that he perceives he has gained through

⁹ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, p. 96.

¹⁰ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, p. 97.

¹¹ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, p. 97.

his bargain Jephthah crosses over to engage the enemy and in a very simple and succinct statement the narrator indicates that Yahweh gives the Ammonites into the hand of Jephthah (verse 32). He inflicts a massive defeat on them (verse 33) and they are subdued before Israel.

At verse 34 we come to one of the most haunting and terrible stories in biblical literature as Jephthah goes to his house at Mizpah and his daughter came out to greet him. When he sees her, he tears his clothes and in a very troubling statement indicates that he must keep his vow to God. Perhaps one of the most honorable and heroic characters of the Bible, the daughter of Jephthah, who remains anonymous, we are never given her name, is introduced at this point in the story. She pleads not for her life, but expects her father to keep his vow and she simply asks for two months to mourn that she must die for the unfaithfulness of her father.

Just as Jephthah had suffered because of the sins of his parents so now too his daughter must suffer due to the sins

of her father and his faithlessness.¹² To die childless was considered to be a source of grief and reproach amongst most of the nations of the ancient world, and it certainly was the case amongst the Israelites.¹³ At the end of the two months she returns to her father (verse 39) who carries out the vow that he had made. There then arises a “custom” in Israel that for four days each year the daughters of Israel lament the unnamed daughter of Jephthah. In so many ways this story resembles the tale of Abraham and Isaac, except that there is no intervention from God to rescue Jephthah’s daughter here. The horror of the vow is carried out and perhaps the words of Psalm 22:1: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,” are appropriate for Jephthah’s daughter, though it appears that she remains silent. Despite this flaw and failure on the part of Jephthah is listed in that great list of the heroes of the faith at Hebrews 11:32.

The question that continues to haunt our minds and our hearts is why? Why is Jephthah blessed, why is he

¹² Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, p. 100.

¹³ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 259.

chosen to deliver God's people and why is he listed in the list at Hebrews 11? Perhaps at the very least there is a cautionary lesson to be learned here about God. He is beyond our understanding, he sees more, knows more, understands more, and forgives more, than we can even begin to understand. God will not be put in a box that provides us a warm comfort. The one thing about Jephthah that seems to stand out is that he appears to be, though flawed a man who believes, trusts, to a degree, and even bargains with God during a time of extreme faithlessness. In the end he keeps his heinous vow to God, despite the moral and personal implications. Loyalty to God is more important than morality and even family ties. Jephthah truly challenges our understanding of God.

As we move into chapter 12 the Ephraimites are called to arms and challenge Jephthah because he did not call them to fight against the Ammonites. They threaten to burn down his house. Jephthah indicates that he had indeed called them and that they failed to come to the aid of the their brothers so it was at this point he took his life into his

own hands (verse 3) and then he indicates that it was indeed Yahweh who delivered him from the hands of the Ammonites. He then challenges them for their coming up to fight him and he gathers up the men of Gilead and defeats them in battle.

After their defeat the Gileadites take up positions at the fords of the Jordan and when men are crossing they challenge them to pronounce the word “Shibboleth”, evidently the Ephraimites mispronounce this and say instead “Sibboleth”. The Gileadites then kill them and forty-two thousand are killed at this time. We are then told that Jephthah “judged” Israel for six years before he died and was buried in his town in Gilead. In this incident we see that that Ephraimites demonstrate a lack of faith and fail to recognize the role of Yahweh in the victory of Jephthah in much the same way as did the Ammonites. Because of this they suffer a devastating defeat at the hands of their own kinsmen in a horrific and shocking intertribal incident. Lack of faith, and failure to recognize the hand of God, in the

actions of Jephthah have devastating consequences for the Ephraimites.

Synopsis

This section with the, now common, them of the Israelites doing evil in the sight of Yahweh and worshipping other gods, the gods of the people that they failed to drive out. This time God sends the Philistines and the Ammonites to oppress the Israelites. The Israelites then cry out to God and confess their sins and put away their worship of the foreign gods and then Yahweh, at this point can no longer bear their suffering and the Ammonites are sent to Mizpah for battle with Israel.

At chapter 11 we are introduced to Jephthah, who is the son of a prostitute, a mighty warrior, a Gileadite and perhaps a person who does not know who his father is. He was a person driven out of Gilead and he gathered outlaws around him who made their living by raiding. The elders of Gilead seek out Jephthah to lead them into battle against the Ammonites. He finally consents after drawing Yahweh into the agreement as a witness. He then begins a set of negotiations with the king of

the Ammonites that do not accomplish much more than indicating that Israel's claim over the land is that it was given to them by Yahweh and the Ammonites do not have a legitimate claim over the land, not least because they are three hundred years too late.

The "spirit of Yahweh" comes upon Jephthah and in what would be expected to be his moment of greatest faith and actions he makes a vow to God in a fashion indicative of bargaining and a lack of courageous faith. Despite this he wins a great victory over the Ammonites and when he returns home his only daughter comes out of his house to greet him and thus, according to his vow must be offered as a burnt offering to Yahweh. After a short period of mourning this is carried out under no protest from Jephthah's daughter.

At this point we are told of an incident of intertribal dissension involving Ephraim who accuse Jephthah of dishonoring them by failing to call them to battle against the Ammonites. Jephthah assures them that he did call and that they failed to come and Yahweh was the one who granted the victory. A battle ensues in which the Ephraimites are defeated

and the a great number of them slaughtered. Jephthah judges
for a period of six years and then dies.

Main Points

1. God remains faithful even when the faith of people fails.
2. God responds to genuine repentance.
3. God blesses even unlikely leaders who have genuine faith.
4. God forgives even horrific, and rash errors in judgment, when faith is present.

Questions

1. Why do you think people tend to drift away from God?
2. Why do you think war often brings people into closer relationship with God?
3. How do you think 10:17 is an act of Yahweh's blessing of Israel?
4. Why do you think the men of Gilead sought out Jephthah to lead them?
5. What difference does the parentage of Jephthah play in the story?
6. How do the things that parents do affect their children?
7. Why do you think the author of Judges does not condemn the vow of Jephthah?
8. Why do you think we are never told the name of Jephthah's daughter?

9. What do you think this story teaches us about the nature of Yahweh?
10. What does the fact that the “spirit of Yahweh” (11:29) of God coming upon Jephthah not keeping him from making foolish choices teach us about God? Ourselves?