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Q&A#68 Did Jephthah Kill His Daughter?

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Today's question: "Jephthah? Human sacrifice or something else?"

For more on this question, see John Barach's lectures on Joshua, Judges, and Ruth: https://theopolisinstitute.com/downloads/joshua-judges-and-ruth_29291. Or see James Jordan's commentary on Judges: <https://amzn.to/2A0zxeZ>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is Jephthah, human sacrifice or something else? Presumably with reference to the story of Judges chapter 11, where Jephthah promises, or vows, that if he is given victory over Ammon by the Lord, then he will sacrifice whatever first meets him from the doors of his house. When he returns from the victory, his daughter comes out with a timbrel to welcome him.

And so he offers as an ascension offering, his daughter. And this leads to a lot of different questions. What exactly is taking place? How does this fit in with the biblical statements against the offering of children? All these sorts of things.

First of all, some preliminary remarks. As we look through the book of Judges, there are a lot of fairly gruesome events. We see the events of chapter 19 at Gibeah with the killing, rape and killing.

And then later the butchering of the Levite's concubine and sending her pieces throughout the land of Israel. This is just one of a number of gruesome accounts. And even the heroes of the book of Judges, people like Samson, are not people without problems.

They are people who can be quite brutal, quite sinful. And even though they're mentioned as people of faith in places like Hebrews, along with Jephthah, we need to recognise that these are not necessarily characters that we should sanitise. We should recognise their complexity, the fact that they are not airbrushed within the text.

And an action like this could be a genuine, deep sin on Jephthah's part. And we need to hold that possibility in play. We can't just sanitise it just because he's referred to as a person of faith in Hebrews and also in 1 Samuel that he's spoken of as someone sent by the Lord to deliver them.

We also see the same said about Samson. And at various points we can see that Samson is a very flawed figure. Although he may not be quite as flawed as some people think, there is a lot more going on in his story than just a story of someone with complete faith and a righteous character without any flaws.

He is a complex character like many of the other people in the Book of Judges. A second thing to notice is that when we're talking about sacrifice, we all too quickly jump to the notion of killing. And killing is not necessarily the heart of sacrifice, not even the primary meaning of sacrifice.

This is maybe something to do with a particular understanding of the atonement, but as we look through scripture, many of the sacrifices are focused upon the act of killing. Killing is part of what leads to their meaning, the presentation of the blood as the token of the animal's life, this sort of thing. But there's a lot more going on in sacrifice.

And when we're talking about a particular type of sacrifice, ascension, we need to think about that. Another thing to notice is that when we're talking about the biblical prohibitions on the sacrifice of children, it's worth bearing in mind that those prohibitions may not be as clean cut, clear cut as many would like them to be. That there are certain types of sacrifice that may be permitted, that may be legitimate in terms of those principles.

That the sacrifice of Isaac, for instance, may not be legally, that may not be one that's prohibited. Or the sacrifice of Christ being in terms of the law, it's not a sinful sacrifice. These are tough questions and I think it's easy to give simplified answers to the question of human sacrifice.

There's a bit more beneath the surface there and we need to tread carefully, a lot more carefully than people do when they think that we can answer these questions

straightforwardly. There's more to be said. So first of all, we should not try and airbrush Jephthah.

Jephthah may indeed be someone who's a flawed and complex character, someone who's righteous in certain respects, who's a sinner in others. The book of Judges, where every man does right in his own eyes, is a book of people who are righteous in some respects and yet deeply sinful in others. So we need to keep that in mind.

We also need to recognise the complex meaning of sacrifice, that sacrifice should not be straightforwardly identified with killing and that sacrifice, finally with reference to child sacrifice, may be more complicated than first appears. Beyond this, what else can be said? First of all, when we look at the story, we can see that the vow is made at a particular point. Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah and he passed through Gilead in Manasseh and passed through Mizpah of Gilead and from there Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, if you will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the people of Ammon shall surely be the Lord's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering or literally in ascension.

So we can see within this account and here I'm resting quite heavily upon the work of John Barrett in his recent lectures on the subject of Joshua, Judges and Ruth from the Theopolis intensive that he taught on the topic. I'll give a link to his lectures below where they can be bought. They're really worthwhile listening to.

But what you can see here is a sequence of events and and and and it all begins with the spirit of the Lord coming upon Jephthah. This is a series of events and one of the series of events is him taking this vow. He's taking this vow to offer up whatever comes out of the doors of his house to meet him, to the Lord and then God fulfills this vow.

God fulfills what Jephthah asked for. There's a prayer here, a prayer that God would deliver the people of Ammon into his hands and then a promise that in his recognition of his dependence he will give the first fruits of his house. The doors of the house are associated with the womb, the blood on the doorposts, the firstborn that opens the womb and here we have Jephthah symbolically offering the first fruits of his house, the first fruits that come after his victory.

And what is he expecting? Is he expecting the dog to come out? Well he probably wouldn't have owned a dog but is he expecting some pet or is he expecting some domestic animal, some cattle to come out? I don't think so. I think that's not what he is expecting. I think he is expecting someone to come to meet him, probably a member of his household, one of his servants or someone else and he is shocked when it is actually his daughter that comes to meet him.

So he's expecting to be met by a human being most likely. The other thing to notice as

John Barrett argues is that Jephthah does not seem to be a rash person. As you read through these stories, these accounts of Jephthah again and again you see him being circumspect in his actions and doing things step by step and taking careful consideration over what course of action should be followed.

So this vow is not necessarily a rash vow. He's not like Saul in this respect who does make a rash vow concerning the fast when they're in battle. But here it seems that the spirit has been involved in prompting him to take this vow.

God has fulfilled his prayer. God does not condemn this vow immediately or anything along those. We don't see any condemnation of the vow in scripture.

What we have to do is discern from the text itself what's taking place. We have the character of Jephthah. Again, Jephthah would seem to have complicated ancestry.

Jephthah is a mighty man of valor but he's the son of a harlot. And so he's not a true member of Israel. He is someone who seems to be compromised in various respects.

And so he's not recognized as having a true stake within the country by his And so there's a complicated character here. The other thing that's is important to notice is his relationship with Gilead. He wants to be Gilead, wants to raise him up as a head of commander and he wants to take that role.

But he wants to build that role on the basis of God's giving him victory and a blessing for his So his house will be set up for rule. And this is why he takes his vow. He wants to have in this victory a confirmation of his role as the head of Gilead as a sort of proto-king type figure.

And the spirit prompts him to take this vow. He's been looking for this position. Gilead has been looking for someone to exercise this role.

And here we see that God fulfills it but he fulfills it in a way that he takes the only daughter. And the only daughter means that Jephthah cannot build a dynasty. He's got this kingdom but he's got rule but he's not got any sort of dynasty.

God has blessed his endeavors. God has fulfilled his prayer but yet he cannot build a dynasty. He cannot set up a kingdom of his own.

Further things to notice that there is no reference to human sacrifice to Yahweh. More generally in scripture we have things like the story of Abraham and we have things like the ban but of this sort of type there is no reference of human sacrifice to Yahweh. And indeed there would seem to be texts that on the surface of it push against it.

Now those are more complicated than they might first appear but it would seem that there is no straightforward sacrifice to Yahweh. Further things to notice it does not say

that he killed his daughter. It does not say that he ceased to be judged.

Indeed he continues to be judged. He's not condemned for this action as you'd expect him to be if he's done some horrific crime in Israel. No.

Again if he's offering this sacrifice of his daughter, if he's killing her and offering her up as a burnt offering to God, would we expect the priest to just go along? Is he just performing this sacrifice by himself? What exactly is taking place here? And then why does God fulfill his vow? That's a key question. Why does God fulfill his vow and his prayer within it if it indeed is a wicked vow to take or a vow that will have awful consequences? Why in the two months that intervenes does no one intervene and stop him from sacrificing his daughter? What is taking place here? Now I think it's very hard to give a definitive answer but I think that John Barrett's approach on it is more or less correct. That this is a sacrifice that's designed to ensure the rule of Jephthah, to establish some sort of dynasty on the basis of God's victory and blessing of his house.

And he's setting apart his house through this sacrifice. The first born of his house is being occupied, or the first to come through the doors of his house is being offered up. And so this is a symbolic sacrifice of his house in order that he might start some sort of rule on the basis of that, that he might have a status.

Now his status has always been in question in various respects because he's the son of a harlot and quite possibly a Canaanite harlot and he does not have the same status among his brethren. But here is his chance, here is his chance to get an inheritance for himself, get a status for himself and it's foiled. God claims his only daughter and so he cannot build a dynasty.

He's prevented. Now we do see within scripture that there are sorts of sacrifices of human beings. In Leviticus 27 there are vows of human beings.

Leviticus 27 1 to 8. Human beings can be vowed to the Lord. When a man consecrates by a vow certain persons to the Lord according to your valuation, if your valuation is etc it goes all the way on the different valuation. And then it's associated with the beast being brought as offerings to the Lord.

Now what we have here I think is something similar to this but different in certain respects. Again we have later on no devoted offering that a man may devote to the Lord of all that he has, both man and beast, or of the field of his possession shall be sold or redeemed. Every devoted offering is most holy to the Lord.

No person under the ban who may become doomed to destruction among men shall be redeemed but shall surely be put to death. Now this is a significant parallel thing. We do have some sort of sacrifice, this whole burnt offering or this ascension of the cities under the ban to the Lord.

And so this would seem to be some sort of parallel. But there's no suggestion that the people of Israel can place people under the ban purely by their own choice. That's not how it works.

Rather God has placed these things under the ban. God has dedicated them, declared them for his own. When things are devoted to God, when things are dedicated to God, they cannot be redeemed.

And so it is most holy to the Lord. And so Jephthah is in this position. He is in a vow, he has dedicated his daughter to the Lord as a whole burnt, as an ascension offering.

An ascension offering is the same as what we refer to as a whole burnt offering in most translations but literally an ascension offering. And so he is vowed and he is dedicated this one who meets him as he comes back from the victory to the Lord. And so he cannot redeem whoever it is that comes to meet him.

As you could do if he was following the initial pattern Leviticus 27 1-8. Now he has this further problem. He can't redeem her.

And so does this mean she has to be killed? No, it means that the meaning of sacrifice has to be enacted concerning her. And the meaning of sacrifice is not necessarily found in killing. Rather it can mean ascending to God's house and being possessed by him.

When this is talking about the dedication of the wicked people of the land to God, this means their absolute destruction. But for others it can mean becoming part of God's house, being owned by him, being parts of his house rather than parts of the house that they come from. So there's a difference here and a significant difference.

What we have is not the reference to automatic death that we'd have in the case of the people under the ban. Rather we have someone who's dedicated to Yahweh, who has to go up to God's presence, who cannot be redeemed. We see a similar situation in some respects in the story of Samuel.

Samuel being sent up to God's house. Now the being sent up is not, I believe, the ascension itself. Rather it's being dedicated to that house, being brought into God's presence and belonging there so that that person is now a member of God's house and must act accordingly.

Accordingly. What are some of the other details in this passage? Why does she mourn her virginity? Why would that be such a big concern at this point? I mean, why not just mourn the fact that she's going to die? Well, she mourns her virginity with her friends. Her friends would have been her bridesmaids.

If she had gotten married, they are the people who would have accompanied her for that ceremony. The other thing to notice is that as she mourns, her virginity, she is mourning

because if she is part of God's house, those who are in the service of God's house cannot mourn. They cannot mourn while they're in God's service at all.

And so we see this in the case of Aaron. And we see this elsewhere within the law that if you're a priest or if you're a Levite and you're serving in the temple or tabernacle, you cannot mourn. And so she's in this position where she will have to be celibate for the rest of her life.

Now, this is an interesting question. Why would she have to be celibate? What exactly is the meaning of that? We don't see someone like Samuel. Samuel has children.

So presumably Samuel wasn't celibate and he was dedicated to God's house. This is an interesting question and I'm not sure exactly where to come down on this one. We could maybe throw forward a few suggestions.

I'm not sure exactly what it is. But it seems that this was the custom in Israel at the time. It also seems that there were serving women around the temple.

There were serving women mentioned in Exodus who dedicated certain of their mirrors to the building of the tabernacle. And we see also serving women at the beginning of 1 Samuel, which is a similar period to the period described here. At the beginning of 1 Samuel, those serving women at the temple are being abused by Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli.

And so we have a broader complex of the temple and there are some people who are dedicated to the service of the temple who weren't priests or Levites but were serving women who would presumably assist with certain washings, who assist maybe in the preparation of certain meals and other things like that, who would assist women in their work and maybe teach the women as well. We don't know exactly what they did but there was this group of women associated with the temple. And if they were, they seem to have had some different status as well, that presumably they did not have children, they did not marry.

And this may be also one of the reasons why Hophni and Phinehas would have, it was a particular violation that they were having sexual relations with the serving women. This wasn't just a matter of adultery with wives of Israelites who were serving the temple, but this was taking women who had been dedicated to God and as part of that dedication were remaining virgins for the whole of their lives and they were defiling them. And it was a statement about Israel itself as the wife of Yahweh, the one dedicated to him.

And this was a more serious action that there were symbols of Israel's status. In the same way as there were a significant status that the priests and the Levites had and that this came out in certain stricter sexual requirements concerning marrying widows and other things like that, that these women in their virginity represented the status of Israel

in a particularly symbolic way. And we see some emphasis upon virginity, although in the case of men in the book of Revelation and we see other references in scripture to virginity being given some sort of symbolic importance.

Now I don't believe that we have a biblical command that women should have done this. I think that there may be some prudential reasons why it made sense and maybe it was also related to issues of uncleanness. I don't know, but there's a lot of things going on here that we just aren't told, we have to speculate.

And here I believe that that's what happened to Jephthah's daughter. She was set apart for the service dedicated to God's service. She could not be redeemed and so she ascended to God's presence.

She was declared, she was claimed by God for his service. And in the same way as God claims other things and the ascension of the offering into God's presence represents the worshipper, here the ascension of Jephthah's daughter into God's house, she can't return. She now belongs to God's house and she must serve God's house.

And Jephthah also is rendered, as it were, he's like a dry tree now. He's like a eunuch. He has no offspring to preserve his name.

His sole child has now become a member of God's house. And so he can serve as the ruler of God's people in certain respects, but he must serve in that way as a eunuch within God's house, as one who serves the dynasty of Yahweh, not his own. And that, I believe, is the significance of why God chose the daughter and why we see God fulfilling the vow in this particular way.

It explains why Jephthah took the vow. It explains why the significance of his daughter being taken in the order scheme of his plans and why this was such a tragedy for him. And it also explains, in certain respects, the significance of the virginity of the daughter.

Other things to notice, we see that there are lamenting of Jephthah's daughter that is later described. The word literally is to recount and we see that in Judges 5.11. In Judges 5.11, in the song of Barak and Deborah, far from the noise of the archers among the watering places, there they shall recount the righteous acts of the Lord, the righteous acts for his villagers in Israel. And so I think there's a similar thing going on here that the people that she becomes a sign in Israel and then the daughters of Israel go four days each year, presumably associated with the lunar calendar, and they recount or tell the tale of Jephthah the Gileadite or recount to her, talk to her about what's been happening.

But I think it's more likely just tell her story and it's associated with the times of the moon, which would also explain why the significance of the third month, that women are associated with the moon in scripture and elsewhere and the third month maybe is associated with some feast of the moon. Further things that Gilead and Israel are

dedicated at this point. This is a significant event.

This is something that is a positive thing in certain respects. God has given victory to his people. He has blessed them and he has dedicated the house of Jephthah and of Gilead to himself.

But that dedication has happened in a way that means that Jephthah will not build his own dynasty. He will not develop his own sort of reign as he had hoped. That's what he had been looking for, but that's not what's going to happen.

If you have just a few other remarks, we do see some other examples of sacrifice in scripture. The sacrifice of human beings, the sacrifice of the Levites, the Levites are given as a heave offering to the Lord, a heave offering in replacement for the firstborn sons. The firstborn sons have been set apart or claimed by Yahweh during the celebration of the Passover.

And so again we see God claiming certain members of Israel. Again, those who are the firstborn associated with the doors, again, and they are set apart for the service of Yahweh. And then later on we have the Levites being offered as a heave offering to take their place.

Again, the important thing to notice is it's the meaning of sacrifice that is important here, not killing as such. The meaning of the heave offering, the meaning of the dedication of the Israelites firstborn, it's the meaning of the sacrifice. It's not to be found in just the fact that they're killed or something along those lines.

There is a symbolic association with killing, that those who are not dedicated to God, who are not taken up into his service, need to be either redeemed or there needs to be some sort of, or if they're unworthy or if they're not properly offered up, they are killed as the firstborn of Egypt. And so God claims the daughter of Jephthah for himself. She cannot be redeemed as the firstborn sons of Israel were redeemed and replaced by the Levites.

And so she must serve in the temple or the tabernacle for the rest of her days. She can't marry. And that again would seem to be associated with some custom within Israel, not an explicit command that is given.

But I think there are reasons to speculate about the reasons for that. I think there may be some reason for it. And I'm not yet sure.

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