

Judges

Judges 11: Jephthah's Daughter

Who is Jephthah?

Judges 11 is different from the other tales of Israel's military victories in the book of Judges. While the majority of Judges features heroes known for their success on the battlefield, the character Jephthah is remembered instead for what happens after he returns home.

Jephthah's biography could be described as a "rags-to-riches" story. He is first introduced as the son of a prostitute, which positions him as an underdog in ancient Israel. He seems to be a tough, charismatic leader and gathers his own band of outlaws after being thrown out of his father's house.

Deals with the Deity

Jephthah's story quickly turns sour when he vows that if he defeats the Ammonites, he will offer the first person who comes out of his house as a burnt offering to YHWH upon his return. Vows were considered incredibly powerful mechanisms for swaying the deity in one's favor. There are similar stories in other ancient cultures about vows made to their gods as well (Greek and Moabite mythologies, for example).

It is unclear in this text whether Jephthah intended for his sacrifice to be a human one. While the laws of Leviticus suggest that human sacrifice is not acceptable, it is unlikely that those laws were in effect when this story was written. It is possible that Jephthah expected a sheep or goat to exit his house first given that domestic animals were kept inside the home alongside humans during this time. It is also possible, however, that Jephthah was desperate enough to win his battle that he was willing to sacrifice something (or someone) of higher value if it meant that God would secure his victory.

Be Careful What You Vow

Judges 11 is striking, unusual, and dramatic, which may be by design. The moral of this story is far from obvious. Many readers are left feeling unsure what their takeaway from this story

ought to be. Perhaps this story is simply meant to shock and confound its audience, asking only “what do you make of that?”

One could argue that the lesson is “be careful what you vow because a vow cannot be undone.” Vows to YHWH are serious and not to be made lightly. Even Jephthah’s daughter seems to understand the irreversible gravity of her father’s vow. She faces her fate resolutely and without protest, stipulating only that she first go with her maidens to the mountains to mourn her virginity. God does not intervene on behalf of Jephthah’s daughter as he did for Isaac in Genesis 22. In the end, the God of Israel in Judges seems to accept this particular child sacrifice.