

THE DEMISE OF JEPHTHAH: TEACHING THE TEXT

Judges

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Due to the extremely disturbing descriptions of violence, this passage is not appropriate for younger audiences. It is now notoriously known as a "text of terror," and it is therefore important to respond to the question of why God did not intervene in these instances of human sacrifice and tribal genocide. First, it must be affirmed that God is indeed passive in this account. God's exasperation with Israel is expressed at the beginning, where he gives over the Israelites to their own depraved devices (10:13-16; cf. Rom. 1:24). The Israelites' aberrant actions are their own, and God is not culpable for them. Second, it is important to clearly condemn Jephthah's actions. In the literary context, the Jephthah cycle must be viewed as the penultimate example of apostasy in the descending spiral of Judges 3-16. Thus the narrator does not need to proffer his obvious disapproval; his censure is already implied by the strategic placement of the story.

Once these issues are sufficiently addressed, then one can focus on other implications that emerge from the emphases of the narrator. The first implication is about *minding theology*. Jephthah demonstrates ignorance of (or disregard for) the Torah when he wrongly assumes that Ammon received its land from its own god, that Yahweh is localized, and that Yahweh is pleased by human sacrifice (11:24,31). His syncretistic assumptions, which are especially offensive to God (see Deut. 12:31), also have tragic consequences on others (Judg. 11:35-40). Christians must take note that accurate knowledge of God through Scripture is essential for life and growth (see Deut. 8:3; 30:15-16, 19-20; Ps. 1:2-3; Prov. 8:35; 9:11; Matt. 4:4; 1 Tim. 4:8, 16), that ignorance can lead to death and disaster (Deut. 30:15, 17-19; Ps. 1:6; Prov. 8:36; 9:18; Hosea 4:1-6; Rom. 1:18-32), and that perseverance in theology "will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16; cf. 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 3:14-15; Titus 1:9).

The second implication from this passage is about *manipulating God*. Jephthah's vow is an attempt to bribe God so that victory—and perhaps Jephthah's own legitimacy as head—is assured (11:30-31). Divine manipulation was also the issue in 10:10-16, where the Israelites tried to cow God into delivering them, and God refused to be bought (10:13-14, 16; cf. Deut. 10:17). Thus it is important to clarify that God grants victory in this passage not in response to Jephthah's vow but because he is gracious and just (Judg. 2:18; 11:27). So also, Christians should never presume that God must meet their needs, nor should they expect God to comply with their selfish agendas. Even in prayer, a Christian may be tempted to "strong arm" God into answering in a certain manner or time frame. This is manipulation, and it exasperates God. Instead, Christians are called to focus on God's will rather than their own (see Matt. 6:7-10; 26:39, 42; Luke 22:42; James 4:3, 15).

The third implication from this passage is about *managing the mouth*. "Open mouth syndrome" is a prominent theme in the Jephthah account (see the comments on Judg. 11:1). Whenever he opens his mouth in negotiations, diplomacy, God-talk, or lament, Jephthah's self-interests are revealed (cf. Matt. 12:34; 15:18; Luke 6:45). His words may also be manipulative (Judg. 11:7,9,11,30-31),



confused (11:24,31), ignorant (11:24,31,35), judgmental (11:35), and possibly dishonest (12:2-3). Most of these words—including the term "Shibboleth" (12:6)—are unnecessary and lead to disaster and destruction for those around Jephthah. This story offers a sobering reminder about the power of words (cf. Prov. 18:21; James 1:19,26; 2:12; 3:1-12) and the necessity of managing input (i.e., minding theology) so that output and outcomes are pleasing to God (Matt. 6:19-23; Luke 11:34-36; James 1:21; 3:11-12).

The fourth implication is about *maintaining the family*. Jephthah comes from a broken and abusive home (11:1-3,7), and in turn he abuses—actually slaughters!—members of his own family (11:30-39; 12:4-6). This is an alarming demonstration of how hurt people hurt people. But it does not have to be this way. The family is designed by God to be a vehicle of life and growth, and it is the place where God's teachings are studied, modeled, and taught (see Exod. 20:12; Deut. 4:9; 5:16; 6:2, 7-9, 20-25; Josh. 4:6, 21; 24:14-15; 2 Tim. 1:5-6; 3:15; contrast Judg. 2:6-3:6). While destructive behavior in the family (such as abuse, violence, addiction, abortion, and infidelity) can replicate exponentially over generations, it is essential to break the cycle of sin by receiving forgiveness through the cross and by making Christ and his word central to family life.