

SHOULD JEPHTHAH HAVE BROKEN HIS VOW?

Judges

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It is clear that vows are taken very seriously in the Old Testament. The general rule is that they are voluntary, but once made must be kept (Num. 30:2 [Heb. 3]). Even a rash (thoughtless) vow must be kept, unless it is overruled in a specified time by someone who has the authority to do so (e.g., a father or husband; Num. 30:3-16). However, if someone unwittingly vows to do something evil, when he realizes he has done wrong he must confess it and bring a suitable animal as a sin offering, and the priest will offer it on his behalf and make atonement for him (Lev. 5:4-6).

As the exegesis of the passage has shown, Jephthah was wrong to make the vow in the first place. Not only was it unnecessary (God would have given him the victory anyway), but it was effectively a bribe, and therefore a denial of his bold, public expression of confidence in Yahweh, the (righteous) Judge in 11:27. Furthermore, since child sacrifice was a pagan rite condemned in the law of Moses (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5), to do it—even in fulfillment of a vow—would be to commit an abomination (Jer. 32:35), and therefore incur God's judgment rather than secure his help.

So there is no question that Jephthah did wrong in making the vow, and compounded that wrong by sacrificing his daughter. But since his intention was to secure God's help, he cannot have known he was doing something that was forbidden. He certainly knew the history of Israel's arrival in Transjordan (11:15-26), believed that Yahweh was the supreme Judge, and was capable (at his best) of having faith in him (11:27). But he was also capable of making theological compromises (11:24), and (at his worst) of doubting God and resorting to pagan ways of trying to secure his favor (11:30). This should hardly surprise us given the generally confused state of Israelite religion in the period of the judges and the mixed career of the previous judge, Gideon (6:25-32; 8:27).

