

FOUR ACTS OF VOWING IN THE BIBLE

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The definition of a vow in the Tanakh is a promise to dedicate "persons or property" to God.¹ Careful reading of the four vows discussed below will enable us to create a basis for understanding the nature of making a vow. The creation of a set of common characteristics will highlight what made a vow so important in the Israelite culture during biblical times, and in the cultures of other peoples who also gave a place in their lives to making vows.

FOUR EXAMPLES

1. Jacob's Vow - Genesis 28:20-22

And Jacob vowed a vow, saying: 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go [walk], and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee.'

2. Israel's Vow - Numbers 21:2

And Israel vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said: 'If Thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy² their cities.'

3. Jephthah's Vow - Judges 11:30-31

And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord and said: 'If Thou wilt indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt-offering.'

4. Hannah's Vow - I Samuel 1:11

And she vowed a vow, and said: 'O Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thy handmaid and remember me, and not for-

get Thy handmaid, but wilt give unto Thy handmaid a man-child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.'

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Two other characteristics of all these sample vows are that they all are voluntary and cannot be retracted (Num. 30:3). While the Israelite community accepted the vowing of vows, as did other peoples of their time and place (Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites),³ no law required a person or group in distress to vow a vow. Deuteronomy 23:23 in fact states: *But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.* Ecclesiastes 5:3 puts it this way: *Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.* This characteristic of vows being voluntary and non-retractable is what Jephthah states briefly when he sees his only child coming forth to greet him as he arrives home after his victory in battle: *'I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back'* (Jud. 11:35).⁴

It is readily apparent that each vow is preceded by an introduction by an unidentified narrator. While the introductions are similar, they are not exactly the same. The key to all four is the phrase *And [So and So] vowed a vow.*⁵ In this way, the narrator alerts the reader that a vow is forthcoming. We recognize that the narrator is not the one who made the vow, and though we know the identity of the vower we do not yet know the substance of the vow.⁶ That is, the introduction is helpful but not sufficient for full comprehension.

The conditional word *if* appears at the start of each vow or very soon thereafter. It is with this word that each vower states a condition; that is, actions that the Lord must perform. Fulfillment of the condition will demonstrate the Lord's support for the vower. After stating the condition, the vower then makes one or more promises to the Lord that will in turn be fulfilled after the condition is met. The vowers do not wait for the Lord to meet the conditions before they make their promises. Rather, they immediately make promises that will obligate them to take some action when God meets all conditions.

Jacob sets forth four specific conditions, yet it is possible to interpret his vow as actually setting forth only one broad condition – *God will be with me* – followed by three specific requests: *keep me in this way . . . , give me bread . . . , and bring me back to my father's house in peace.*⁶ These three terms together comprise the broad condition that the Lord will be with Jacob on the journey to and back from Haran.

Both Jephthah and the children of Israel collectively set forth only one condition. Hannah, too, sets forth only one condition: the Lord must give her a son. The other requests – seeing her affliction, remembering her, and not forgetting her – are but a prelude to the one obligating action of giving her a man-child.

When we have read all four vows, we realize that each begins with a Condition Clause followed by a Promise Clause. The structure is: If You, Lord, will do X, then I, the vower, promise to do Y.⁷ The word "then" appears at the start of each Promise Clause, but only the narrator uses the word "vow." Those who make the vows do not label them as vows or promises. A vow may be made by an individual, as with Jacob, or an entire group, as with the children of Israel. Both sexes make vows, albeit Israelite laws put some restrictions on vows by women (Num. 30:4-16).

As we read through the terms of each vow, we realize that the vower is addressing the Lord. We know this even though the children of Israel, unlike the other three vowers, never mention the Lord in their vow. This characteristic of addressing God directly is absolutely essential to a vow. The four examples here are distinguished from other reports of vows and references to vows elsewhere in the Tanakh that are not introduced by the narrator. For instance, in his so-called and suspect vow Absalom (II Sam. 15:7-8) tells King David that he once made a vow (40 years earlier according to verse 15:7), and now he seeks permission from his father to leave Jerusalem to go to Hebron to fulfill that vow.

We know that our four vowers are addressing the Lord. The single best sign of this is the explicit salutation that Hannah uses to begin her vow. All four vowers use linguistic clues that signal direct talk to the Lord that includes personal matters and first-person references to themselves. A related characteristic is that they all address the Lord directly and personally with second-person and first-person indicators. For example, Jacob ends his vow, saying

'and of all that Thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto Thee.' Thus, with similar language and vow construction all four create and express a direct and personal relationship with the Lord in their vows.

The conclusion of Jacob's vow leads us to recognize another linguistic characteristic: Each vower uses language that manifests intensification or strengthening of a verb. The intensification appears in the original Hebrew via a same-root verb/verb doubling, a construction not available in English. Jacob says in two Hebrew words *tenth* and *I will tenth*, a construction rendered in English translation with an adverbial strengthener of the verbal root to form *'surely tenth.'* (Jacob does not indicate how often he will give one-tenth. Is it a one-time tenth? An annual tenth?). In the other three vows by the Israelites, Jephthah, and Hannah, the intensifying Hebrew constructions appear as *'indeed deliver'* and *'indeed look.'* The intensification apparently arises from the emotions felt by the vowers as they address their God.

The intensified language characteristic relates to another essential characteristic that only Hannah mentions explicitly, but all four share. That is, they all seek the Lord's support because they are in distress, in trouble, afflicted. Hannah beseeches the Lord, saying, *'O Lord of Hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of the Thy handmaid'* In this manner, Hannah opens her vow by calling attention to her affliction, just as the narrator did in the verse prior to Hannah's vow, *. . . and she was in bitterness of soul – and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore* (I Sam. 1:10). Hannah is in distress because she is childless and asks the Lord to give her a son. With a child she will be able to take her place as a mother in her Israelite community, and will stop the taunting from her husband's other wife, who has already given birth to children. Status as a mother in Israelite society has always been greatly important to women, witness the concern by then-barren matriarchs Sarah and Rachel to have children (Gen. 16:4, 30:1-8) and recall that even Leah, already a mother of four sons (29:32-35) was concerned when she *left off bearing* children for a while (30:9).

The other three vowers are in distress or anxiety, and they all seek God's help to remove the source of distress. Jacob, who has just felt the presence of the Lord, seeks protection, food, and clothing to sustain his life on his long journey to Haran. He is traveling alone and might in fact be doing so on foot.⁹ When he vows his vow, Jacob does not explicitly acknowledge his dis-

trepreneur. However, he does so later in Genesis 35:3 when he leads his large family to build an altar in Beth-el. At that time he acknowledges that he was in distress when he vowed his vow, saying, *'I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress and was with me in the way on which I went.'*

The Israelites and Jephthah are about to engage in a battle with their enemies. Any battle will create distress for a soldier who might well lose his life, but these two battles are particularly distressing. For the Israelites, the imminent battle follows an initial setback in combat with Canaanites. There is no doubt that significant additional stress arose for the Israelites, with all their murmuring factions in the desert, to agree to vow as one united nation, which is manifested by first-person pronouns in *'my hand'* and *'I will utterly destroy.'*¹⁰ For Jephthah, his imminent battle with the Ammonites follows his failed attempts to negotiate with the king of the Ammonites rather than engage in battle with him. For these reasons, the two imminent battles of the Israelites and Jephthah were especially troubling, and led them to seek the Lord's support through their vows.¹¹

Another characteristic in common is that each vower promises to give something to the Lord based on the conditions established, and the gifts to the Lord constitute the fulfillment of the vows. Jacob promises to take the Lord as his God, to build a House of the Lord at the site of the pillar of stone he had put up at the start of his journey to Haran, and to give back a tenth of the property that the Lord has given to him. The Israelites promise to dedicate (put under a ban) the cities of the defeated Canaanites as holy territory that is not for personal use. Hannah promises to dedicate her son to the service of the Lord and not to allow a razor to touch his head, as did the barren wife of Manoah (Jud. 13:2-25). Jephthah promises that the first creature to come forth from his house to greet him will belong to the Lord and be offered to the Lord as a burnt offering. (In contrast to Jacob, the Israelites, and Hannah, who gave back to the Lord something that they had gained from their vows, with Jephthah there is no direct relation between the two sections of the vow.)¹²

LEEWAY FOR VOWERS

The common characteristics described above set some broad guidelines while leaving the vower enough leeway for self-expression within the biblical tradition of vowing. The tradition was long in developing, and Jacob's vow is the first recorded in the Tanakh, predating the settlement in Egypt and the Exodus. The vow of the Israelites came during the journey in the desert to the Promised Land. Jephthah's came during the period of the Judges. Hannah's came at the very end of the period of the Judges. That long span of time, several hundred years, allowed for the growth of the set of noticeable common characteristics.

Jacob, Israel, Jephthah, and Hannah all made a vow in time of some distress. However, theirs were not the only instances of distress in the Tanakh. Among the others are a false accusation of theft (Gen. 44:1-17), the severe illness of a child (II Sam. 12:15-17), and the threat of destruction of Jerusalem (II Kg. 18:33-19:2). Individuals differ in regard to what kinds of events distress them, what degree of distress they can bear, and how long they can bear it before seeking the Lord's support. Clearly, each vower is unique, and every vow comes from a unique interaction of a vower and his or her circumstances.

In Jonah 1:4-16 we read about the great storm that God brought to the sea while Jonah was aboard a ship fleeing to Tarshish. Jonah told the distressed non-Israelite mariners that he is the cause of the storm and they should cast him overboard to calm it. Reluctantly, they did so, and the sea did become calm. Then the mariners *feared the Lord exceedingly, and they sacrificed a sacrifice and made vows.*

SUMMARY AND COMMENTS

The four vows discussed here share eight common characteristics: (1) a voluntary vow can be made by anyone and everyone, man or woman, individual or group; (2) the unidentified narrator and not the vower defines the act as a vow; (3) the vower is in a state of distress and seeks the Lord's support via the vow; (4) the vower uses language that manifests some intensity of feeling, as well as a personal relationship with the Lord; (5) the vows show a complex concern with urgent human issues and fears; (6) the vower addresses the Lord directly and in a personal manner; (7) the vower sets forth a condition for the Lord to meet; (8) the vower follows the condition with a

promise to dedicate something – a service or property – to the Lord as thanks for the Lord's support.

As illustrated by the four examples, a vow to the Lord deserved careful thought on the part of the vower for three prime reasons. First, a vow creates a special relationship between the vower and the Lord. Second, the promises are spoken voluntarily by the vower and must be fulfilled without delay (Num. 30:3; Deut. 23:22). Third, a narrow focus on the combination of the vows' common characteristics can be deceptive in that it can lead to the belief that God must act before the vower acts. A broader look at the entire process of vowing facilitates a realization that the vower has stepped forward to initiate the interaction with the Lord, first by seeking the support of God and then by setting forth the conditions to be performed by Him to remove the cause of the vower's distress. This act by the vower constitutes the foundation of biblical vowing. This view is consistent with passages in the Tanakh that encourage people to seek the support of God when they are distressed. For example, Moses said, *'For what nation is there, that hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God whensoever we call upon Him?; . . . Seek thy God; and thou shalt find Him, if thou search after Him with all thy heart and all thy soul'* (Deut. 4:7 and 29). Amos put it this way, *Seek the Lord, and live* (Amos 5:6). The psalmist encourages people to seek the Lord in a time of distress rather than remain alone, saying: *Make vows; then fulfill them to the Lord your God* (Ps. 76:12).

NOTES

1. M. Benovitz, *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).
2. The expression *utterly destroy* here means to *put under a ban*; the ban devotes the land completely to the Lord and prohibits the use of the land for personal purposes. See Joshua 6:21-25 for similar language regarding the putting of land under a ban.
3. T. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) pp.73-136.
4. Jephthah's vow has motivated many scholars to analyze the intent and results of that vow. The single best review of the complex issues in the vow is in D. Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1986) pp.7-55; for a recent and brief commentary on Jephthah's vow that differs from most of the literature, see Y. Feintuch, "The Folly of Impetuous Speech: Four Biblical Incidents," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34 (2006) pp.16-19.

5. The verb/noun doubling "vowed a vow" reflects the Hebrew precisely. The expression "vowed a vow" is not common today in English, but it remains so in Hebrew. Throughout the rest of the article, the more idiomatic term "make/made a vow" is used.

6. Though the narrator does not identify Hannah by name, the pronoun "she" identifies her completely because the vow comes during her prayer to the Lord.

7. It would have been possible to present the two parts of the vows in reverse order, promises first and conditions second. It is a matter of emphasis and ease of understanding. The order used in the Tanakh is easier to understand.

8. The vow is suspect in that Absalom is planning to overthrow his father, King David. Absalom needs to leave Jerusalem to effect his plan. According to the text, he had vowed his vow long ago. It seems odd that he has just now decided to fulfill his vow in Hebron, away from Jerusalem where King David resides. Did Absalom really vow a vow, or is his expressed need to fulfill a vow actually just an excuse so he can separate himself from his father? See II Samuel 15:7-9.

9. The text uses the verb "walk." See Genesis 28:5; 28:10; and, especially, 29:1. In his commentary on Genesis 29:1, Robert Alter suggests that the expression *lifted his feet* "is perhaps a general idiom for beginning a particularly arduous journey on foot" (*The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, [New York: Norton, 2004] p. 152). Moreover, in Genesis 32:11 Jacob himself confirms that he crossed the Jordan on his way to Haran only '*with my staff* . . . '

10. See Exodus 19:8 where the children of Israel also spoke together as one group, saying at Mount Sinai, '*All that the Lord hath spoken we will do.*'

11. Note that the events that arose from Jephthah's vow, which is the subject of a large body of literature, are connected to an ambiguity in the vow regarding who or what comes to greet Jephthah upon his return home.

12. Marcus, p.19.



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