

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

MOSHE REISS

The story of Jephthah and his daughter has elements of drama, starting with the difficult conditions of his early life as the son of a prostitute/concubine. His history begins with eviction from his home and family, when he is driven out by his half-brothers. Yet after this loss of place and status, by his own strength and prowess he became a chieftain in his father's clan of Gileadites and eventually a leader in Israel.

Jephthah was appointed to command the fighting men of Gilead against the Ammonites who were attacking them. Before engaging the enemy in battle, and after we are told that *the spirit of God was on Jephthah* (Jud. 11:29), he promises to pay a price for victory:

And Jephthah made the following vow to the Lord: 'If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and shall be offered by me as a burnt-offering [olah]' (11:31).

Did Jephthah not know, as we know from the text, that God had already promised him victory? Or did he need further assurance?

What living creature could he have expected to be the first out of his house? Animals were not kept inside houses, so should he not have expected it to be a human being – his wife, his daughter, a servant or slave? (Augustine in *The City of God* suggests that he intended to kill his wife.¹) As it happens, it is his daughter, his only child, who greets him playing upon a timbrel and dancing – the customary way for women to welcome the return of a victorious hero. (Miriam plays a timbrel and dances after the victory at the Sea of Reeds [Ex. 15:20]).

Jephthah at once shifts the responsibility from his own folly onto her: *'Alas, daughter! You have brought me low; you have become one of those who trouble me! For I have uttered a vow to the Lord and I cannot retract* (Jud.

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11:35). The end of the story is stated almost evasively: . . . *he did to her as he had vowed* (11:39).

Jephthah made a rash and thoughtless vow or promise, as others had done but without the calamitous consequences. Caleb had declared *'I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher'* (Josh. 15:16). By good chance, that man was an eligible and suitable husband for Acsah. Another rash vow was made by King Saul before entering into battle against the Philistines: *'Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!'* (I Sam. 14:24). When he learned that his son Jonathan, who had not heard this decree, had eaten some honey he threatened to put him to death, but was prevented by his own men. The rash vow closest to that of Jephthah is found not in the Bible but in Greek mythology: Idomoneus, King of Crete, caught in a storm at sea, vowed to Poseidon that if he reached shore safely he would sacrifice the first creature he saw – who turned out to be his young son. He, however, refused to carry out his vow, a plague ensued and he was exiled.

In the Bible, the major tale involving sacrifice of a child by a father is the Akedah. However, the Lord's command to Abraham is rescinded, and Isaac is spared (Gen. 22:1-18).² Another Greek parallel on the sacrifice of one's own child is that of Agamemnon, who was supposed to offer up his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis and facilitate the Greek siege of Troy. In Aeschylus' drama *Agamemnon*, Iphigenia begs her father for her life. In Euripides' version *Iphigenia in Tauris* she accepts her fate, and, in fact, beseeches her father to accomplish the act. Her mother, Clytemnestra, totally rejects her husband's action and conspires to murder him in revenge. How did Jephthah's wife react to her husband's vow and her daughter's reaction?

In the case of Saul and Jonathan, the King's own men prevented the execution. It seems that there was no attempt to stop Jephthah, not even by the daughter's own friends and kin. Why did not any one of his associates remind him that human sacrifice was forbidden to the Israelites (Lev. 18:21, 20:2-5; Deut. 12:31, 18:10)? Esther Fuchs asks why the daughter did not appeal to Israelite morality, rather than respond by quoting his *'I have opened my mouth to the Lord'* (Jud. 11:35-36) and thus affirming that she considers her death to be ordained. Was she volunteering for martyrdom, and if so why?³

THE VOW

Can a vow to commit a grave sin – the sacrifice of one's child – be valid? Must a vow be fulfilled regardless of the consequences? The near-sacrifice of Isaac, often compared to the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, came before the laws given through Moses, and in any event is presented as a test of Abraham's faith that in the outcome banned such a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1). The Mishnah, composed 1500 years after the period of Jephthah, states that a vow to commit an act in direct violation of *halakha* is an invalid vow (Mishnah Nedarim 2:1). The Talmud states that Jephthah's vow was invalid (JT Pesachim 9:6) but assumes that nonetheless Jephthah sacrificed his daughter.

Why does the text not condemn this vow? Jon Levenson suggests that despite the Torah's condemning of human sacrifice, the redemption of the firstborn (Ex. 13:2) was sometimes seen as an appropriate sacrifice.⁴ The theme of violence is the central core of the Book of Judges. The book as a whole seems to suggest that the Israelites, instead of rejecting the idolatry and pagan morality of the region they conquered, adopted them. One commentator suggests that Jephthah's sacrificing his daughter is the quintessential symbol of that adoption.⁵

DID JEPHTHAH SACRIFICE HIS DAUGHTER?

The text does not state explicitly that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, but only that *he did to her as he had vowed* (Jud. 11:39). This ambiguity allows for debate. He had vowed to offer her as an *olah*. Does that Hebrew word mean only a "burnt offering," or can it also be a "consecrated offering" of some other kind?

During the first millennium of the Common Era, Jewish commentators unanimously (insofar as is known to us) interpreted the text literally; namely that Jephthah put his daughter to death. This includes non-rabbinic sources, such as Josephus and Pseudo-Philo, who make a comparison between the fate of Jephthah's daughter and the Akedah.

The comparison lies in both experiences bearing the value of atonement. But a midrash states that God tells Jephthah's daughter that her death would have no value of atonement.⁶ These authors would almost certainly be aware of the Christian concept regarding Jephthah's daughter as not only having value of atonement but foreshadowing the crucifixion of Jesus.

Starting in the Middle Ages, many highly respected Jewish commentators were unwilling to tolerate the concept of a human sacrifice in the Scripture and they struggled to find an acceptable alternative. Many accepted a re-fashioning and resculpting of the text to conclude that Jephthah in fact consecrated his daughter as a perpetual virgin and anchorite rather than take her life as a sacrifice. This was considered a preferable alternative, despite the fact that this ideal of perpetual virginity and asceticism had never previously appeared in Jewish texts and in fact lay outside the Jewish belief system and cultural milieu.

The first Jewish commentator to suggest the alternative of a different mode of consecration was Abraham Ibn Ezra (1093-1167). According to Ibn Ezra, the vow implied that the first thing to appear if appropriate would be sacrificed, if not it would be consecrated for holiness, with the key words being "if appropriate." This approach increases the options for the exegete's interpretation, but of course those words do not appear in the text. We shall see below how another exegete found a textual justification for a non-sacrificial mode. Ibn Ezra argues that Jephthah built a house for his daughter outside the city for seclusion and provided her sustenance all the days of her life.⁷

Radak (David Kimche – 1160-1235) states in the name of his father Joseph that the "*ve*" in *ve'ha'ali'tihu olah* makes it conditional, interpreting the letter "*vav*" to mean "if." He stresses that "if" it is an appropriate sacrifice, then it will be a burnt offering, and "if" not, it would be consecrated to God. Defining the "*ve*" as "if" – rather than the conjunctive "and" – is not a usual interpretation in the biblical context. Kimche then states that "she secluded herself as do ascetics who are enclosed in their cells."⁸

One must understand the historical atmosphere of this era in order to grasp the context of this interpretation. The period 1080-1170 was the time of greatest growth of monastic life for women in Spain, England, France, and Italy. According to a study by Berman, there were in fact more female recluses than male ones in that period.⁹

Gersonides (1288-1344) and Abarbanel (1437-1508) adopted the consecration ideal rather than the sacrificial one.¹⁰ The former suggests that a male would be dedicated to the Tabernacle, not unlike a Levite or priest, despite the rule that only a member of the hereditary line of Levi could be so dedicated. In the case of a woman, she would be required to be celibate, and Ger-

sonides explains that Jephthah built a cell for his daughter. Abarbanel states that the Church "derived the practice of establishing houses of seclusion for women from the daughter of Jephthah."¹¹ He states also that the daughter could not even see her female friends who come on four days of the year to visit her, but only hear their voices. That may have come from the "Ancrene Riwe" well known at the time, that prohibited Christian anchoresses from viewing other persons even in confession,¹² and Abarbanel believes she chose the site for her cell during the two months she wandered on the mountains.

The cultural adoption of a Christian idea by these Medieval-Renaissance Jewish commentators is remarkable. All were and remain leading exegetes. To extol a celibate woman appears nowhere in the Tanakh, although Jeremiah is noted as a celibate prophet and priest (Jer. 16:2). Given that these Jewish commentators lived in areas where women's convents were established, it is difficult to believe, as noted by Berman, that they were not influenced by the monastic ideals of Christian women.¹³

ABRAHAM'S SON AND JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

'. . . whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me . . . shall be the Lord's, and shall be offered by me as a burnt-offering [olah]' (11:31). The Hebrew words are *ve'ha'ali'tihu olah*, almost identical to God's command to Abraham, *ve'ha'alehu le'olah* on the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22:2). Rashi wrote in reference to Abraham and the sacrifice that the word *le'oleh*, although usually translated *for a burnt offering*, comes from a root meaning "going up," and may have meant "take him up." Thus, he proposes that God may have requested Abraham simply to take Isaac "up" to Mount Moriah, perhaps for a direct blessing and now "take him down."¹⁴

In many ways, the stories of Abraham and Jephthah are mirror opposites of one another.

* Abraham is the eldest son of a respectable family; Jephthah is the son of a concubine.

* Abraham's child is male; Jephthah's is female.

* Abraham's child is named Isaac; Jephthah's daughter is unnamed.

* God is testing Abraham's faith; Jephthah's vow perhaps originated from a lack of faith that he could be assured of victory without it.

* Abraham consoles his son '*God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering*' (Gen. 22:8); Jephthah does not console his daughter; he bemoans his own fate and puts the blame on her.

* An angel appears to save Isaac; girls appear to lament Jephthah's daughter.

* Abraham's story is told clearly; Jephthah's story is full of ambiguities.

* Abraham leaves many progeny; Jephthah had no other child, and the outcome of his vow left him childless and without progeny.

Despite Isaac being saved and Jephthah's daughter being sacrificed literally or figuratively, both are seen by Christian commentators as having atoning value and as foreshadowing the crucifixion of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

There is no punishment of Jephthah in the biblical text, but the Midrash suggests he was punished. Phineas, the High Priest, could have saved the daughter by annulling the vow, as in talmudic times a High Priest could annul a vow. But in a midrash he says, "I am a High Priest, the son of a High Priest, shall I go there to help an ignoramus?" He was insulting Jephthah, who in turn responded by saying "I am the chief of Israel, shall I go to Phineas?" (Gen. Rabbah 60:3). Thus the daughter lost her life. Both Phineas and Jephthah were condemned and punished.

According to the biblical text, when Jephthah died, *he was buried in the cities [plural] of Gilead* (12:7). According to the Midrash, that is because his parts disintegrated and were in the cities where they fell (Gen. Rabba 60:3, Lev. Rabba 37:4). The former midrash tells us Phineas lost his Divine inspiration as a result of not acting to save Jephthah's daughter.

NOTES

1. Quoted in John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 126.
2. Another such deed was performed by King Mesha of Moab, who, to save himself from defeat by his foes, sacrificed his son, the crown prince; but he was a pagan (II Kg. 3:27).
3. Esther Fuchs in "Marginalization, Ambiguity and Silencing," in *A Feminist Companion To Judges*, ed. Atalyah Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1993) p. 125.
4. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) p. 16.

5. David Janzen, 'Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter,' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol. 29 (March 2005) pp. 35-36.

6. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967) Vol. IV, pp. 43-47, VI, p. 203.

7. Joshua Berman, "Medieval Monasticism," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 95 (Spring 2005) p. 227.

8. From Uriel Simon, "*Tehillah Le Moshe*" trans. Joshua Berman, quoted in "Medieval Monasticism," p. 230. See also Israel Mehlman, *Israel, Jephthah and Jephthah's Daughter* (Jerusalem: World Jewish Bible Society, 1962) pp. 21-23.

9. Berman, p. 253.

10. Berman, p 230. and David Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1986) pp. 8-9.

11. Berman, p. 230.

12. The "Ancrene Riwle," of which many texts still survive, was a well-known 13th- century manual for anchoresses.

13. This is well documented in the Berman article noted above. It is interesting that Jephthah's daughter's virginity appears as a key ideal of holiness while her grandmother, Jephthah's mother, is noted as the mirror image, a prostitute. A prostitute is in some occasions in the Hebrew Bible called *kedesha* [holy one] as when Tamar acted as a prostitute to seduce Judah (Gen. 38:21). The term refers to consecration to a pagan temple as a holy prostitute.

14. See the author's article "Abraham's Moment of Decision," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. XXXV:1 (January-March 2007) pp. 56-59. I should note that Rashi assumed that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter.



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