

Rethinking Jephthah's Foolish Vow

Perplexing Passages

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BIBLE & THEOLOGY

Editors' note: This series analyzes perplexing passages of the Bible. See Dan Doriani's [earlier installment \(https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-is-the-abomination-of-desolation\)](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-is-the-abomination-of-desolation) on [Matthew 24:15-16 \(https://www.esv.org/Matthew%2024%3A15-16/\)](https://www.esv.org/Matthew%2024%3A15-16/).

Most Christians struggle to understand the narratives recorded in the book of Judges. Consider the opening account where Adonai Bezek is captured by the tribe of Judah, humiliated by having his thumbs and big toes cut off, and then dies in Jerusalem. What about Gideon's fleece in [Judges 6 \(https://www.esv.org/Judges%206/\)](https://www.esv.org/Judges%206/), or Samson's repeated relationships with illicit women in [Judges 14 \(https://www.esv.org/Judges%2014/\)](https://www.esv.org/Judges%2014/)-16? How do we understand and explain such difficult texts? Do we ask, "Who are the Adonai Bezek's in your life?" or "What would Samson do?" Maybe it would be better to "dare to be a Gideon," but I don't think so.

Another troubling episode recorded in the book of Judges appears in 11:29-40, when the judge Jephthah makes a vow that many have argued cost him the life of his daughter and only child—a human sacrifice. How could Jesus, in good conscience, proclaim that such a narrative testifies to him ([John 5:39 \(https://www.esv.org/John%205%3A39/\)](https://www.esv.org/John%205%3A39/); [Luke 24:44 \(https://www.esv.org/Luke%2024%3A44/\)](https://www.esv.org/Luke%2024%3A44/)), or how could Paul understand this

text as the gospel promised beforehand ([Romans 1:2](https://www.esv.org/Romans%201%3A2/) (<https://www.esv.org/Romans%201%3A2/>))? Did Jephthah really kill his daughter in order to fulfill a foolish vow made in the heat of battle? For many, the answer to this question is a troubling “yes.” But there is another option.

It is also possible that Jephthah never intended to sacrificially kill anyone or anything that came out of his house after he had returned from battle. Rather, this vow may be symbolic of a full or complete offering to the LORD as an expression of thanks for his grace in delivering Israel from their oppressors. Let's consider the evidence together.

Six Reasons to Reconsider the Human Sacrifice Interpretation

1. The New Testament evaluation of the judges presented in the book of Judges is positive. Consider [Hebrews 11:32](https://www.esv.org/Hebrews%2011%3A32/) (<https://www.esv.org/Hebrews%2011%3A32/>)-34: “And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah of David and Samuel and the prophets—who by faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.” Notice how the author of the book of Hebrews lists Jephthah with the likes of David, Samuel, and the prophets. Additionally, these men served “by faith” and “executed justice,” not innocent young girls. Could the author of Hebrews rightly include Jephthah in this list if his last act as Judge included the illegal and horrific slaying of his own daughter?

2. In addition to the New Testament, the book of Judges itself affirms the calling and work of these men. For example, in [Judges 2:16](https://www.esv.org/Judges%202%3A16/) (<https://www.esv.org/Judges%202%3A16/>)-19, it is recorded that the LORD raised up these men to save Israel, not to kill them. Additionally, the text is clear that the LORD was with the judges in their work. So to impugn the work of the judge is to impugn the work of the LORD through that judge. I am not saying that the judges were sinless, perfect people. With regard to their callings, however, they were faithful by God's grace through the power of his Spirit. Additionally, it is important to observe that when God's appointed leaders do fall into sin, the Bible is always ready to point it out. Moses struck the rock twice and so was banned from entering the promised land ([Num. 20](https://www.esv.org/Num.%2020/) (<https://www.esv.org/Num.%2020/>)). David committed adultery and murder and received public, prophetic condemnation ([2 Sam. 11](https://www.esv.org/2%20Sam.%2011/) (<https://www.esv.org/2%20Sam.%2011/>))-12). Even Paul rebuked Peter over the issue of eating with Gentiles ([Gal. 2](https://www.esv.org/Gal.%202/) (<https://www.esv.org/Gal.%202/>)). There is no such condemnation recorded for Jephthah.

3. In [Judges 11:29](https://www.esv.org/Judges%2011%3A29/) (<https://www.esv.org/Judges%2011%3A29/>), it is recorded that the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and then in the next verse (11:30), Jephthah makes his infamous vow. Contextually speaking, therefore, this vow is the result of coming under the influence of the Spirit, not something in opposition to the work of the Spirit. This is a common pattern in the book of Judges. For example, in [Judges 6:34](https://www.esv.org/Judges%206%3A34/) (<https://www.esv.org/Judges%206%3A34/>), the Spirit of

the LORD clothed Gideon, and then two verses later (6:36) he proposed the sign of the fleece. Additionally, with Samson, when the Spirit of the LORD rushed on him he killed a lion (14:6) and defeated the Philistines (14:9; 15:14, 19).

4. With Jephthah's vow, we must understand that he did not expect some type of animal or household pet to burst forth from the house upon his return. We know this to be true for a couple of reasons. First, in 11:31, the verb "to meet" is always used for people, never for a person encountering an animal. Second, in the ancient world, when men returned from battle, women would customarily come forth in procession in order to participate in celebratory dancing (cf. [Ex. 15:20](https://www.esv.org/Ex.%2015%3A20/) (<https://www.esv.org/Ex.%2015%3A20/>); [Jud. 5:28](https://www.esv.org/Jud.%205%3A28/) (<https://www.esv.org/Jud.%205%3A28/>); [1 Sam. 18:6](https://www.esv.org/1%20Sam.%2018%3A6/) (<https://www.esv.org/1%20Sam.%2018%3A6/>)). Give the cultural context in which these events transpired, Jephthah likely assumed that a woman would come out from the house to meet him, perhaps a servant girl or, even better, his mother-in-law, but certainly not an animal. A better translation for 11:31 would include "whoever comes out," not "whatever comes out."

5. With Jephthah's vow in 11:31, we read that this offering would belong to the LORD, and that it would be offered up as a "[whole] burnt offering." This particular offering is not used symbolically in any other part of the Old Testament. However, offerings in general, both in the Old and New Testaments, may be used symbolically in order to characterize something offered to the LORD by way of sacrificial giving. For example, in [Exodus 29](https://www.esv.org/Exodus%2029/) (<https://www.esv.org/Exodus%2029/>), and [Leviticus 8](https://www.esv.org/Leviticus%208/) (<https://www.esv.org/Leviticus%208/>), Aaron and his sons (the Levites) were symbolically offered to the LORD as a wave offering (something completely consumed with fire), a gesture of complete and total dedication to the LORD's service. In [Psalm 51:17](https://www.esv.org/Psalm%2051%3A17/) (<https://www.esv.org/Psalm%2051%3A17/>), a broken and contrite heart is the sacrifice that the LORD desires. And in [Romans 12:1](https://www.esv.org/Romans%2012%3A1/) (<https://www.esv.org/Romans%2012%3A1/>), Paul admonished believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to the LORD, an act of spiritual worship. Thus it is clearly possible, and more likely probable, that Jephthah, under the Spirit's guidance, was using the language of sacrifice symbolically in this context, symbolic of complete and total dedication to the LORD.

6. The willing fulfillment of this vow by Jephthah's daughter (11:36) appears to contradict the literal interpretation of a child sacrifice. Not only were such sacrifices clearly forbidden and abominated in Scripture ([Deut. 12:31; 18:9](https://www.esv.org/Deut.%2012%3A31%3B%2018%3A9/) (<https://www.esv.org/Deut.%2012%3A31%3B%2018%3A9/>))-12; cf. [2 Kings 3:27; 23:10](https://www.esv.org/2%20Kings%203%3A27%3B%2023%3A10/) (<https://www.esv.org/2%20Kings%203%3A27%3B%2023%3A10/>); [Is. 57:5](https://www.esv.org/Is.%2057%3A5/) (<https://www.esv.org/Is.%2057%3A5/>)), but the concern of the text is never death, but always virginity. In 11:37, Jephthah's daughter requests a two-month leave in order to lament her virginity. Then, in 11:38, the text records that while with her friends, she wept over the fact of her virginity. Then again, in 11:39, it is recorded that Jephthah fulfilled his vow to the LORD, and the text clearly describes how this vow was fulfilled—"that is, she did not know a man." It appears, therefore, that Jephthah's vow consisted of offering a member of his house to the full-time service of the LORD, and thus not to the normal duties of a household, such a marriage and having children. Service of this type is not unknown in the Old Testament ([Ex. 38:8](https://www.esv.org/Ex.%2038%3A8/)

(<https://www.esv.org/Ex.%2038%3A8/>); [1 Sam. 2:22](#)
(<https://www.esv.org/1%20Sam.%202%3A22/>); cf. [1 Sam. 1:11, 22](#)
(<https://www.esv.org/1%20Sam.%201%3A11%2C%2022/>)-28).

Ultimate Judge

This is certainly a difficult text to interpret, and both options deserve careful consideration. But consider the book of Judges as a whole. It begins with the faithfulness of Joshua's generation and the tribe of Judah, but terminates with the tribe of Benjamin becoming Canaanite, as wicked as Sodom (cf. [Gen. 13](#) (<https://www.esv.org/Gen.%2013/>)) with [Jud. 19-20](#) (<https://www.esv.org/Jud.%2019-20/>)). As the book develops, God's people decay into greater and greater wickedness ([Jud. 2:19](#) (<https://www.esv.org/Jud.%202%3A19/>)), but the LORD was merciful and continued to send judges in order to deliver his people. The greater the wickedness of the people, the greater the LORD's salvation through each judge.

By the end, Gideon must forsake his family, Jephthah must offer up his only child (cf. [Gen. 22:2](#) (<https://www.esv.org/Gen.%2022%3A2/>)), and Samson must die in order for God's people to experience salvation from sin and oppression. Does this not sound like the gospel promised beforehand, a sure testimony to the person and work of Jesus? He left his family, the only begotten child of God. He died to finish the work of the judges that he had sent in ages past that we might keenly fix our eyes on him, the author and perfecter of our faith.

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