



Judges - Chapter Eleven

II Judges 3:7-16:31 - The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostasy (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eleven

The chapter begins with the family background of Jephthah, the son of a prostitute driven out of his community by the sons of his father's wife, and settling with outlaws. When the Ammonites threatened the people turned to Jephthah and asked him to be their leader, which he would only undertake if they would swear before the Lord to accept him back. This they did.

In a dialogue between Jephthah and the king of the Ammonites, the king claimed that Ammon was against Israel because they had stolen his land and wanted Israel to give it back peaceably or he would take it by force. Providing a lesson from history as to how the Israelites had been opposed by the various peoples as they travelled to the Promised Land, finally leading to war between some of them. Jephthah showed that the land was rightfully theirs and was given to them by the Lord. The king rejected his argument.

Jephthah then made a foolish vow before the Lord. He promised that, if the Lord gave him victory over the Ammonites, then whatever or whoever met him as he returned to his home he would offer as a burnt-offering to the Lord. Jephthah was then victorious in battle.

On his return home it was his only child that met him and thus she was to be the burnt-offering. She accepted that her father must keep his vow to the Lord but asked for a period of grace for two months to spend with her friends lamenting the fact that she would never marry. After the two months she was offered to the Lord and the vow fulfilled.

II.i Judges 11:1-28 - Jephthah

Jephthah was the eighth judge, and his is the third extended account of a judge's activity after Deborah and Gideon. Jephthah freed Israel from the Ammonite burden, but he made a foolish vow that led to a personal tragedy.

II.i.i Judges 11:1-3 - Introduction to Jephthah

Like Jair (Judges 10:3), Jephthah was from Gilead. He was a mighty warrior, but his illegitimacy caused his half brothers to expel him from his father's house. Like Abimelech (Judges 9:4), he attracted outlaws or worthless people, as did Jeroboam: *<<and certain worthless scoundrels gathered round him and defied Rehoboam son of Solomon, when Rehoboam was young and irresolute and could not withstand them>>* (2 Chronicles 13:7), which did not bode well for his future; indeed, God did not raise him up; refer to the comment made on v.6.

¹ Now Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, was a mighty warrior. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. ² Gilead's wife also bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah away, saying to him, 'You shall not inherit anything in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman.' ³ Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him.

Judges 11:1-3

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. This brave and notable man in Israel had a clouded pedigree. His mother was a prostitute, a common heathen prostitute, and Jephthah was rejected by his community because of this.

The area of Gilead was the part of Israel that lay east of the Jordan River, comprising the territory of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh. Coincidentally, Jephthah's father was also named Gilead.

Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Rejected by his family because of his illegitimate ancestry, Jephthah grew up in this area in what would be modern-day Syria. Tob has been tentatively identified with the modern el-Taiyibeh, about 15 miles east-north-east of Ramoth-gilead, in the desolate area which lay just outside the eastern boundary of Israel and the northern frontier of Ammon.

Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him. Here was a man, rejected by his people and living outside of the law and yet God would use him to restore peace to Israel. Such are the mysterious ways of the Lord.

Jephthah was not necessarily the leader of a band of criminals. Adam Clarke explains that the term outlaw or worthless men does not necessarily mean a criminal. The word may mean they were simply poor people, without property, and without employment. He and his band therefore possibly operated more in the manner of David and his group years later, protecting cities and settlements from marauders. David did this in the period described in 1 Samuel 25:4-8, receiving payment from those whom they helped. It is also possible that they only plundered the villages of enemy peoples, such as the Ammonites.

II.i.ii Judges 11:4-11 - Jephthah's Commissioning

After some negotiation, Jephthah was commissioned by the people but not, apparently, by God as 'head' and 'leader' over Israel.

⁴ After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. ⁵ And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ They said to Jephthah, 'Come and be our commander, so that we may fight with the Ammonites.' ⁷ But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father's house? So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble?' ⁸ The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, 'Nevertheless, we have now turned back to you, so that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and become head over us, over all the inhabitants of Gilead.'

Judges 11:4-8

After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. The nation of Ammon, the Ammonites, lived to the south of Israel. They were a semi-nomadic group of people who descended from Abraham's nephew Lot.

Come and be our commander. Because of the crisis of the Ammonites, the leaders of Gilead were desperate for an able military commander, and they turned to Jephthah. They were willing to give him the authority as head over Gilead. God did not 'raise up' Jephthah, as he had raised up previous judges. Now, for the first time, a leader was commissioned by the people, without seeking God's approval, another sign of their increasing apostasy.

So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble? Jephthah rightly challenges their motives. They had shown him no mercy for being the son of a prostitute, something he had no control over. However, when they were in trouble they willingly called upon his services as a brave fighting man.

So that you may go with us and fight. This is similar to the language later used by the Israelites to ask Samuel for a king: <<*But the people refused to listen to the*

voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles'>> (1 Samuel 8:19-20). In both cases, even though God acquiesced, the request was inappropriate. God, not any judge or any king, was to be Israel's prime warrior.

⁹ Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head.' ¹⁰ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, 'The Lord will be witness between us; we will surely do as you say.' ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah.

Judges 11:9-11

If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head. The wording here suggests that it was more a question than a statement, i.e. shall I be your head? This is confirmed by their reply: The Lord will be witness between us; we will surely do as you say. Jephthah was only willing to assume leadership in the crisis if he could also remain a leader after the crisis. He did not want to be rejected again as a worthless man.

Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah. Jephthah represented a strange mixture of faith and foolishness. While he acknowledged God, overall his foolishness seemed to outstrip his faith. Mizpah was the same place where the famous agreement between Laban and Jacob was made; refer to Genesis 31:43-50. The idea of Mizpah, meaning watch, is "If you do wrong according to this promise, God will see it and may he punish you."

II.i.iii Judges 11:12-28 - Diplomatic Discussions

The negotiations between Jephthah and the Ammonites consisted largely of an impressive speech by Jephthah, answering the Ammonite charge in v.13 that Israel had unlawfully seized the territory currently disputed. Jephthah asserted that 'the Lord, the God of Israel,' himself was the one who dispossessed these peoples from before Israel and that Israel was not an aggressor (v.15), but merely a recipient of the Lord's generosity. The Ammonites had brought this upon themselves by hindering Israel, thus prompting God's help in dispossessing them. In fact, Israel was not to take Ammonite land, since God had expressly forbidden it: <<***When you approach the frontier of the Ammonites, do not harass them or engage them in battle, for I will not give the land of the Ammonites to you as a possession, because I have given it to the descendants of Lot***>> (Deuteronomy 2:19).

However, Sihon, king of the Amorites, had taken some of what was Moabite/Ammonite territory, and then Israel had taken this and other territory of Sihon: <<Israel took all these towns, and Israel settled in all the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages. For Heshbon was the city of King Sihon of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and captured all his land as far as the Arnon>> (Numbers 21:25-26).

The Ammonites, if they had indeed been involved at all, deserved what was coming to them. Furthermore, the Ammonites never really had true claim to the land to begin with; rather, it was the land of the Amorites (vv.19-22). Finally, it was a little late to be challenging Israel's claim to the land in any case, since three hundred years had passed since the events in question (v.26). Jephthah ended his speech with an appeal to God to judge between the two disputants.

¹² Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, 'What is there between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?' ¹³ The king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, 'Because Israel, on coming from Egypt, took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably.'

Judges 11:12-13

What is there between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land? Jephthah asked a simple question: why are you in the land of Israel? Perhaps the whole dispute could be resolved by negotiations and diplomacy instead of warfare.

Because Israel, on coming from Egypt, took away my land. The king of Ammon gave a simple reply, saying that they were in Israel because it was really their own land, and Israel took it from them unjustly.

¹⁴ Once again Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites ¹⁵ and said to him: 'Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, ¹⁶ but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. ¹⁷ Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, "Let us pass through your land"; but the king of Edom would not listen. They also sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. ¹⁸ Then they journeyed through the wilderness, went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, arrived on the eastern side of the land of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for

the Arnon was the boundary of Moab. ¹⁹ Israel then sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, “Let us pass through your land to our country.” ²⁰ But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people together, and encamped at Jahaz, and fought with Israel. ²¹ Then the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel occupied all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. ²² They occupied all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan.

Judges 11:14-22

The review of the past refers to events in the wilderness years recounted in Numbers 20:14-21.

Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. Jephthah’s written response to the King of the Ammonites carefully explained why Israel had a right to the land that the Ammonites claimed belonged to them.

So Israel occupied all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. Jephthah reminded the King of the Ammonites that since the Amorites conquered the Ammonites and took control of their land. When Israel defeated the Amorites in battle, they justly took the land of the Amorites, which also happened to be the previous land of the Ammonites. The war against the Amorites was prompted by the vicious Amorite war against Israeli civilians.

They occupied all the territory refers to the limits of the Amorites’ land, precisely what the Ammonites claimed was theirs in v.13; refer to Numbers 21:24.

²³ So now the Lord, the God of Israel, has conquered the Amorites for the benefit of his people Israel. Do you intend to take their place?

²⁴ Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that the Lord our God has conquered for our benefit? ²⁵ Now are you any better than King Balak son of Zippor of Moab? Did he ever enter into conflict with Israel, or did he ever go to war with them? ²⁶ While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the towns that are along the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time? ²⁷ It is not I who have sinned against you, but you are the one who does me wrong by making war on me. Let the Lord, who is judge, decide today for the Israelites or for the

Ammonites.’²⁸ But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent him.

Judges 11:23-28

So now the Lord, the God of Israel, has conquered the Amorites for the benefit of his people Israel. Do you intend to take their place? Jephthah argued that since God gave this land to Israel, the Ammonites had no claim over it.

Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? Jephthah argued that the Ammonite god Chemosh must show himself worthy to conquer the land of Israel. Since Israel held this land for three hundred years, it demonstrated that Chemosh was not greater than the God of Israel. How could he be? He did not even exist except in their minds!

Chemosh was the Moabites’ god (1 Kings 11:7 and 11:33); elsewhere, the Ammonites’ god was Molech (1 Kings 11:7) or Milcom (1 Kings 11:5 and 11:33, and 2 Kings 23:13). However, Ammon and Moab were closely associated (Deuteronomy 2:18-19 and 23:3-5; Judges 3:12-13 and v.15 above), as both were descended from Lot: <<*The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day*>> (Genesis 19:37-38). The two nations likely shared cultural and religious heritage, and Chemosh may have been considered stronger than Molech/Milcom. Some commentators state that Milcom was another name for Chemosh rather than Molech.

And should we not be the ones to possess everything that the Lord our God has conquered for our benefit? Jephthah freely acknowledges that it was the Lord and not the people of Israel who had conquered the land, thus showing an understanding of his nation’s history and the power of God who had gone before them into the land they now possessed.

This was an inherent challenge: “If your god is mighty enough to give you the land, then let him do it. Let us see who is stronger, Yahweh or Chemosh.” Jephthah did not see this battle as primarily between two armies, but between the God of Israel and the false god of Ammon. Jephthah showed true wisdom in seeing this as primarily a spiritual battle.

Three hundred years. If the exodus took place circa 1440 BC (the ‘early date’), with the conquest of Palestine beginning about 1400 BC, then Jephthah’s speech would fall around 1106 BC. However, three hundred years may be a round number, giving an approximate date. If the exodus took place circa 1260 BC (the ‘late date’), then Jephthah’s number is either inaccurate or a generalisation indicating simply seven or eight generations. The three hundred years is

remarkably close to the total of the various figures for the judges and the periods of oppression given up to this point. The exact figure is 319 years.

A later account gives an insight into the date of the exodus: <<*In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord*>> (1 Kings 6:1). The four hundred and eightieth year after Israel's release from slavery and the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel was around the year 966 BC. This text is important in relation to the date of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Taken at face value, the figure of 480 years would support the traditional early date for the exodus in circa 1446 BC. On the other hand, if one allows for some symbolism in understanding the 480 year figure, e.g. supposing it to result from twelve generations, with a generation taken symbolically to be 40 years, although it is actually about 25 years, one would arrive at a late date for the exodus of about 1260 BC, which some feel allows for greater agreement with Egyptian history.

II.j Judges 11:29-40 - Victory and Jephthah's Foolish Vow

The conflict with the Ammonites reached its peak with their defeat by Jephthah. However, the climax of the Jephthah narrative centres upon his rash vow. In order to gain God's favour, he promised to sacrifice whatever came out of his house upon his victorious return. This reflected a misguided application of the principle of offering to God the best of one's treasure. Theoretically, a vow to make a burnt-offering was valid according to Leviticus 22:18-20, which also specifies what is a valid offering. The tragic result of Jephthah's vow was the sacrifice of his only child, a daughter, although there is an alternative train of thought; refer to the comments made on vv.36-40.

Jephthah was called upon by the leaders of Gilead to fight against the Ammonites, who were oppressing the Israelites in Gilead, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Judah. After Jephthah defeated the Ammonites, the men of Ephraim became angry that they had not been called to join the battle, and they gathered to fight Jephthah at Zaphon: <<*The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, 'Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down over you!' Jephthah said to them, 'My people and I were engaged in conflict with the Ammonites who oppressed us severely. But when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand. When I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hand, and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day, to fight against me?'*>> (Judges 12:1-3). Jephthah's men, however, defeated the Ephraimites and killed them as they tried to return to their homes across the Jordan River.



Jephthah Defeats the Ammonites

II.j.i Judges 11:29-33 - Jephthah's Vow

Jephthah rightly sought the Lord to give him victory in the coming battle but he made a rash vow stating that on his return home after success in battle he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his front door. It would be his only child.

²⁹ Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites.

Judges 11:29

The spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. This was the source of Jephthah's courage and can be the source of courage for Christians as well. When people are beset by fears and anxieties, they need to fill their lives with Jesus and be filled with the Holy Spirit. The OT speaks many times of God's Spirit acting upon individuals, usually to empower them for some service for the whole people of God. In Judges this is described by the Spirit being upon them. This was seen before with Othniel (Judges 3:10). He took possession of Gideon in Judges 6:34 and 'rushed on' Samson in Judges 14:6, 14:19, and 15:14.

He passed on to the Ammonites. The filling of the Spirit makes people advance. Christians go forward in the sense of spiritual progress and they go forward in the sense of confronting the enemies of God.

³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt-offering.'

Judges 11:30-31

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. Although well intentioned, this was a foolish vow. Such vows can be attempts by people to manipulate God or put him under obligation to them. It is far more important to be on God's side than to try and persuade him 'to be on your side'. Even a Spirit-filled man can do foolish things. The Holy Spirit does not overwhelm and control individuals, he guides them, and that guidance can be resisted or ignored at smaller or greater points.

Whoever comes out. Whoever is literally 'whatever.' The wording here would indicate that Jephthah intended to offer some animal as a burnt-offering. However, the grammar also allows for whoever as translated here, in which case Jephthah could have intended to offer a human sacrifice all along. If so, what surprised him was not that he had to sacrifice a person, but that it was his daughter. Human sacrifice was strictly forbidden in Israel as recorded in Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2; Deuteronomy 12:31 and 18:10; Jeremiah 19:5; Ezekiel 20:30-31, 23:37 and 23:39. Yet, Jephthah's foolishness impelled him to make such a vow and apparently to follow through with this abomination; refer also to the comment made on v.39.

³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. ³³ He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighbourhood of Minnith, twenty towns,

and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

Judges 11:32-33

The Lord gave them into his hand. God won a great and important victory for Israel through Jephthah. He overcame bitterness and family rejection to meet a great need. Despite his difficult past, God still wonderfully used him.

So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. This was another victory for Israel won under the leadership of a Spirit-filled judge.

II.j.ii Judges 11:34-40 - Jephthah's Daughter

Seeing that it was his only daughter that would have to be sacrificed in order to keep his vow to the Lord, Jephthah was understandably distressed but his daughter accepted it. She asked if she could spend two months lamenting her fate with her friends before submitting to the vow of her father. This was granted and she went off into the hills with her friends before returning to her father, who kept his vow.

³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.'

Judges 11:34-35

He tore his clothes is sign that Jephthah was grieving and in genuine shock. He had made his foolish vow sincerely, fully intending to keep it. Yet he had not seriously considered the consequences of the vow. Therefore he was grieved when his daughter was first to greet him out of his house for she was his only child: <<*And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn*>> (Zechariah 12:10).

I cannot take back my vow. Vows were solemn affairs, made only to God. People were not forced to take them, but, if they did, they had to be kept, under normal circumstances: <<*If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt. Whatever*

your lips utter you must diligently perform, just as you have freely vowed to the Lord your God with your own mouth>> (Deuteronomy 23:21-23), <<Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbours; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honour those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt>> (Psalm 15:2-4), and: <<When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfil what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it>> (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). However, any vow that would end in sin was not binding; keeping it could not please God, and the Levitical laws provided for such instances: <<Or when any of you utter aloud a rash oath for a bad or a good purpose, whatever people utter in an oath, and are unaware of it, when you come to know it, you shall in any of these be guilty. When you realise your guilt in any of these, you shall confess the sin that you have committed. And you shall bring to the Lord, as your penalty for the sin that you have committed, a female from the flock, a sheep or a goat, as a sin-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for your sin>> (Leviticus 5:4-6). Human sacrifice was an abomination, and Jephthah should not have followed through with killing his daughter, if indeed that was the outcome.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 and 5:4-6 speak of the danger of making foolish vows. This passage makes it clear that it is better not to make vows at all than to make foolish vows. This does not mean that vows are bad, they can be good. It means, however, that people must take them seriously. Christians need to take seriously the sin of broken vows, and when they see them they must either repent and keep them or repent of the foolishness in ever making the vow, and seek Gods release from the vow. Jesus advises that it is better not to make such oaths at all in Matthew 5:33-37.

At the same time, on the sake of principle only, there was something wonderful about the spirit of Jephthah's willingness to keep his vows, even when it cost him something. In the specific vow he was foolish and should not have kept it, but the tenacity of character that says, I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow is glorious and should be the word of every follower of Jesus Christ.

As followers of Jesus Christ, Jephthah's statement is a reminder of what has been done: a believer has given their word to the Lord.

- They have confessed their faith in Jesus Christ.
- They have declared themselves as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ, and all that it entails.
- They have praised God with their songs and words.
- They have proclaimed their part together with God's people.

As followers of Jesus Christ, Jephthah's statement is also a reminder of what cannot be done: a believer cannot go back on their promises:

- They cannot go back for the sake of being persecuted.
- They cannot go back for the sake of being mocked.
- They cannot go back, even a little way.
- To go back might show that their faith was always false.
- To go back would disgrace the work of Jesus on the Cross.
- To go back would forsake heavenly reward.
- To go back would make no sense.

³⁶ She said to him, 'My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites.' ³⁷ And she said to her father, 'Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I.' ³⁸ 'Go,' he said and sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that ⁴⁰ for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Judges 11:36-40

My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth. Jephthah's daughter shows remarkable faith and faithfulness to both God and her father. She makes no attempt to plead for her own life and returns to face her fate after the two months she spends away with her friends. There was no attempt on her part to change the outcome of her father's vow.

Who did with her according to the vow he had made. Most likely this means Jephthah literally sacrificed his daughter as a burnt-offering. However, another interpretation is that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to perpetual virginity, as a figurative sacrifice, supported by the references to her uniqueness as his only child (v.34), and her virginity (vv.37-40). This would be a tragedy for her, as she would bear no children; but it would also be tragic for Jephthah, whose line would come to an end. Some support for this comes from Jephthah's speech in vv.12-28, which shows enough grasp of Israel's history that he might well have stopped short of literally sacrificing his own child.

Later in their history, Israel began to serve a terrible pagan god named Molech, who, it was believed, was appeased with child sacrifice in the most terrible way imaginable. God never asked to be served in this terrible way, and therefore it cannot be blamed on God: *<<And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire – which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind>> (Jeremiah 7:31).*

So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity. She had never slept with a man. These words seem to indicate that it is more likely that Jephthah set his daughter aside for the tabernacle service according to the principle of Leviticus 27:2-4, where persons set apart to God in a vow were not required to be sacrificed as animals were, but were given into the tabernacle in monetary value.

Many see his daughter's life as one similar to that of a dedicated Catholic nun. It is known that there were women who were set apart for the tabernacle service; they were called *<<the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting>> (Exodus 38:8b and 1 Samuel 2:22b)*. It is possible that Jephthah's daughter became one of these women who served in the tabernacle; a woman like Anna: *<<There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day>> (Luke 2:36-37).*

Culturally, a woman would usually wish to be married and have children. This would be both her duty and a fulfilment of her purpose in life: to perpetuate her husband's and, in this case, her father's line. Therefore, even service to the Lord, although a great honour of course, would still sadden her and her friends if she were never to fulfil this part of her life. Probably most of the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle were older widows.

By sending his unmarried, only daughter to the service of the tabernacle for the rest of her life, it shows how seriously both Jephthah and his daughter took his promise to God. Many commentators object and see no other option than to say that Jephthah horribly fulfilled his vow by the human sacrifice of his own daughter. The attempt to commute the sentence of death to one of perpetual virginity cannot be sustained. Yet her committal to be one the women who assembled at the tabernacle still seems like a feasible explanation because Jephthah is listed as a hero of the faith: *<<And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets>> (Hebrews 11:32)*. It is hard to think of him as doing something so contrary to God's ways as offering his daughter as a human sacrifice and still being mentioned as a man of faith in Hebrews Chapter 11.