

A FEARLESS JUDGE IN ISRAEL

Summary and Historical Background

The next major judge was Jephthah, who in many ways was an outstanding person. However, he is most remembered for his abnormal "burnt offering" vow (11:31). Considering the prohibition in the Mosaic Law concerning human sacrifice (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5), some believe Jephthah fulfilled his vow by giving his daughter to serve the Lord as a virgin. He also squelched the jealousy of Ephraim, which tribe also had caused Gideon some problems (8:1-3). He ruled for six years and was followed by three minor judges, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon (12:8-15).

I. Power of Jephthah — 11:1-12:15

11:1 — "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor" - Jephthah probably judged northeast Israel (in Gilead against the Ammonites) at the same time that Samson judged southwest Israel against the Philistines.

"He was the son of a harlot" — Jephthah had a miserable beginning as a harlot's son. As such he was despised by his half-brothers and cast out (11:2).

11:3 — "There were vain men gathered to Jephthah" - Jephthah had an ability to organize a band of men into an effective fighting force.

"Vain men" can leave the impression that these were evil men, but this does not need to be the case. "Vain" simply means "empty" and can refer to their employment, that they were without jobs, just like those men who gathered around David in the days when he was a fugitive from Saul (1 Sam 22:1-2).

11:5 — "The elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah" - it took humility on the part of these men to admit they were wrong in casting out Jephthah. Now they were pleading for him to be their captain. His brothers must have been in this group according to the words of Jephthah in 11:7.

11:8-10 — Jephthah was wise in making these men of Gilead repeat their promise that he would be their head (their judge), if the LORD delivered them from the Ammonites under his leadership.

11:11 — "Then Jephthah went up with the elders of Gilead" - this took humility on the part of Jephthah to help the people who had despised him. It was a source of his power with men and with God (Jam 4:6).

11:12 — "Jephthah sent messengers unto the king" - Jephthah demonstrated humility by not showing off his strength as a military leader. He tried to avoid war by reasoning with the Ammonite king. With his reputation as a skillful fighter, it must have taken the men of Gilead by surprise when he used negotiations to try to settle the conflict. If Jephthah failed to win this war, serious consequences could have developed, such as happened a few years later during Saul's reign (1 Sam 11:1-2).

11:13-28 — the negotiations between Jephthah and the Ammonite king ended in failure, but Jephthah tried. A summary of the arguments that Jephthah used for not returning the land that the king wanted are as follows: (1) he had a false claim - it was the Amorites who lost their land to the Israelites, not the Ammonites (11:13, 15, 22); (2) there was a religious reason - the LORD gave them this land (11:23-24); (3) there was a political precedent that had been set - Moab never tried to regain this land on the pretext that this Ammonite was using (11:25); (4) there

was a time element involved - three hundred years had passed since Israel possessed the land that the Ammonites now claimed (11:26).

11:29 — "The Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah" - this evidently was a sign of God's approval of Jephthah's life. Othniel (3:10) and Gideon (6:34) already had had this experience of the LORD's. It was Jephthah's primary source of power.

"He passed over Gilead . . . Manasseh . . . Mispeh" — evidently this is a record of his search for troops.

II. Pledge of Jephthah — 11:30-40

11:30 — "Jephthah vowed a vow" - it is wrong to judge Jephthah by saying that he made a hasty, rash vow. Who can say that his man who had reasoned so well with the Ammonite king and who had reasoned so well with the elders of Gilead, suddenly has lost his reasoning powers? Jephthah surely knew the spiritual laws governing Israel as well as he knew the history of Israel. The Mosaic Law prohibited human sacrifice (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut 12:29-32; 18:9-12), so it is doubtful that he would fulfill his vow by giving his daughter to the LORD as a burnt offering.

11:31 — "Shall surely be the LORD's and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" - this has been the distressing part of Jephthah's vow. Did he offer up his daughter as a burnt offering when he returned home in victory over the Ammonites? It is not likely. How could the LORD honor Jephthah as one of His heroes of faith if he offered up his daughter as a burnt offering (Heb 11:32)? It is doubtful that Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt sacrifice, even though Josephus, the early rabbis and the church fathers all held that he did. Instead it seems Jephthah, followed the rule of Leviticus 27:1-8 when it was his daughter that appeared first to welcome him back in victory. He did not redeem her with money, which he could have done according to the Law, but he did more, he gave her to the LORD to be a virgin to serve Him in the Tabernacle at Shiloh. The LORD respected the faithfulness of Jephthah in keeping his vow and let him be a judge of His people.

11:33 — "Twenty cities" - it seems these were the fortress cities that the Ammonites depended on to protect them from enemy attacks in the north.

11:34, 35 — cf. the discussion under 11:31.

11:36 — the submissiveness of Jephthah's daughter is a mark of true humility. It is not difficult to imagine that she learned this spirit from her father.

11:40 — "To lament" - this Hebrew word is only used one other time in the Bible (Judges 5:11 - "to rehearse"). It seems like a fair translation to use "rehearse" here as well. The daughters of Israel rehearsed the marvelous humility and submission that Jephthah's daughter showed when she gave up marriage to serve the LORD in His Tabernacle and by so doing fulfilled her father's vow.

III. The Pettiness of Ephraim — 12:1-7

12:1 — "The men of Ephraim gathered themselves together" - the tribe of Ephraim was upset because they had not had a part in the victory over the Ammonites. Gideon earlier had had the same problem with them (8:1-3), but he got around them by giving them a compliment.

"Went northward" — it is better to translate "northward" as "Zaphon" which is where Jephthah met them. Zaphon is just east of the Jordan River.

"Burn your house upon you with fire" — the men of Ephraim should have been rejoicing in Jephthah's victory, but instead they were bitter and mean. Jealousy was a vicious cancer to the spirit of this tribe.

12:2 — "When I called you" - the men of Ephraim said they had not been called, but Jephthah denied their claim.

12:4 — "Fought with Ephraim" - Jephthah could not escape from Ephraim's jealousy as easily as Gideon had done. There was nothing to say or do to soothe them. He had to fight. They had come with their troops to fight and Jephthah was hard-pressed to meet the challenge or surrender his position as God's judge. He fought them and won.

12:5 — "Took the passages of Jordan" - the Gileadites not only won the battle, but they also took control of the fords over the Jordan so that the Ephraimites, that had escaped death in the battle, lost their lives crossing the Jordan. The Gileadites identified the Ephraimites who tried to cross the Jordan by asking them to pronounce the word "Shibboleth" ("flowing stream"). They found it impossible to pronounce the "sh" and so they said, "Sibboleth." By mispronouncing this word they were detected as Ephraimites and executed. As a result 42,000 Ephraimites lost their lives.

12:7 — "Jephthah judged Israel six years" - it was a short, but effective ministry.