

Jephthah's Vow & Sacrifice (Judges 11:30 – 40)

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(Since this is an interpretive issue, please read the verses carefully and thoughtfully. This brief note is just for educational purposes, not for debate or controversy).

2 Views:

1. First View: Jephthah made a rash vow and sacrificed his daughter according to Canaanite practices which he had embraced.

2. Second View: The latter part of verse 31 – **“And” may be translated as “OR.”** “.....it shall be the Lord's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.” This may be translated as “it shall surely be the Lord's (means if it is a human being that appear first **“or”** (not **“and”** as in most translations) I will offer it up for a burnt offering (if an animal appears first). **“And”** should be translated as **“or.”** In this view, the meaning is, **“If it is a person, then he/she will be given (dedicated) to the Lord's service OR if it is an animal, it will be sacrificed as a burnt offering.”** I personally lean toward this view.

(Ryrie Study Bible seems to favor the second view).

In my understanding, verses 39-40 also support the second view. “He carried out his vow with her” (v.39). It means she was dedicated to the service of the Lord in a life of celibacy (the other view is that she was killed). **“She knew no man”** (v.39) would seem to indicate that her virginity would be perpetuated and in celibacy she will serve the Lord all her life.

Another consideration is verse 29. “The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.” From this time, he was more earnest and respectful to the Lord. Though he was little hasty and rash, he really wanted to please the Lord and win the favor of the Lord. In such a situation, I doubt whether he would opt for a perverse offering of human sacrifice which was clearly prohibited by the Law.

“It became a custom in Israel” (v.40). The young women of Israel went out four days each year to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah; commemorate her sacrifice of dedication in celibacy to serve the Lord. Some translations have “lament” instead of “commemorate.” Even if it is “lament” it need not be for her death, but it was a grieving by the daughters of Israel that this young lady was given to the Tabernacle service before she was ever married. Both translations are inferred from the context. The same Hebrew word is translated in Judges 5: 11 as “Rehearse” (KJV), “Recount” (NKJV, NASB). The word also can be translated as “celebrate,” or “Praise.”

Comparing verses 31, 39-40, it seems best to assume that Jephthah did not make a burnt offering of his daughter, but instead sacrificed/dedicated her to serve in the tabernacle in a celibate state. The fact that Jephthah permitted his daughter to bewail her virginity (verses 37,

38) for two months fits an explanation of perpetual virginity better than human sacrifice. This young lady's dedication was memorialized in Israel.

In any case, Jephthah's foolish vow had serious consequences as the daughter was his one and only child and she was unable to perpetuate the line of her father.