

Jephthah – A Mighty Man of Valour

Our readings for the day introduce us to Jephthah, a man listed in Hebrews 11:32 as being a man of outstanding faith. The narrative in Judges chapter 11 informs us that:

“Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah” (Judges 11:1).

The word translated “mighty man” here, is “gibbor,” which signifies, “powerful, warrior,” and thus is applicable to a man of war. Already, in his youth, Jephthah showed himself to be a mighty man of war – a potential champion to deliver Israel from the hand of their oppressors. This same word is used as a title of Messiah, in Isaiah chapter 9:

“for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, *The mighty God*, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6)

Here, the words “the mighty God” translates the Hebrew words “Gibbor El,” with El signifying “power” or “might” – often used as a title of Yahweh. So the Master then, is to be a “warrior of might”, or Mighty Warrior. He is the One who waged the warfare against Sin, and has valiantly overcome. Through him, the victory is guaranteed for those who engage in the warfare with him (1 Corinthians 15:54-57), as they shall be delivered from the oppressing power of death.

But although Jephthah had shown himself to be a mighty man of valour, there was a stigma attached to him: “he was the son of a harlot”. And for this, his half-brothers despised and rejected him:

“and Gilead’s wife bare him sons; and his wife’s sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our Father’s house; for thou art the son of another woman” (Judges 11:2).

So it was that just like Joseph’s brethren rejected him, Jephthah’s brethren hated him, and expelled him from their father’s house (cp verse 7).

Just as Jephthah was rejected of his brethren, even so Messiah, it is testified, was despised and rejected of his brethren, the Jews. Isaiah chapter 53 describes the Master thus:

“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3).

And just as the reason for their rejection of him was due to his parentage – i.e. being a child of fornication – even so, the Pharisees derided the Master, saying, “we be not born of fornication” (John 8:41) – the obvious implication being that he was, in their eyes. So we see that the experiences of Jephthah form a pattern, or Type, repeated in the pattern of Messiah’s life.

During his time of exile in the land of Tob, certain men also left the land, and gathered themselves together, to Jephthah:

“there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him” (Judges 11:3).

Here, the word translated “vain” literally means “empty”, and can signify empty of understanding, or empty of this world’s goods. The latter seems the most likely in this case, for it is unlikely that a man of Jephthah’s faith would attract men who were empty in spiritual things. Men who were dissatisfied with their lot in life, men who had no material possessions, gathered themselves together to him.

In this, we have mirrored the experiences of David, who was also rejected of his people for a time. During the period when he lived as an exile in the cave of Adullam, four hundred men of Israel went down to him:

“and every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him: and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men” (1 Samuel 22:2).

So it is with Messiah. During the time in which he is despised and rejected by his brethren – the Israelitish race – the men who gather themselves to him, are generally not the rich and the mighty of this world, but those who are poor in spirit, who are dissatisfied with their lot in life (1 Cor 1:27-28). Those who seek for better things, and who trust that he will be able to grant them to him. Those who recognise him to be their Deliverer. We gather ourselves to Messiah, going out to him “without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Hebrews 13:13), just as the empty men gathered themselves together to Jephthah, bearing his reproach in exile.

But the people of Israel were under threat by the Ammonites. The children of Ammon waged war against Israel, “so that Israel was sore distressed” (Judges 10:9):

“And the children of Israel cried unto Yahweh, saying, We have sinned against thee, both because we have forsaken our Elohim, and also served Baalim” (Judges 10:10).

Here, Israel were brought to repent of their sins, by an invading power. Even so, in the not too distant future, the Jewish race which continues to reject their Messiah, shall be brought to repentance by the invading Gogian confederacy of nations as described in Ezekiel 38. Isaiah 63:15-64:12 describes the prayer that Israel shall utter at that time, as they cry out for deliverance. And Yahweh will be very gracious to them at the voice of their cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer them (Is 30:19). He will send them a deliverer, even the One who they rejected so long ago, the Master, Jesus the Christ, as it is written:

“the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith Yahweh” (Isaiah 59:20; see Romans 11:26).

He shall deliver Jacob out of his time of trouble, redeeming him from the hand of them that are stronger than they. As the great Deliverer, he shall “go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle” (Zechariah 14:3). Notice these words; Yahweh will go forth and fight, as he did in Ancient times. In the day of battle of old, he fought by raising up a deliverer for his people, that they might be redeemed from the hand of their enemies and be brought back to Him. Even so it will be in the future.

Just as Israel shall turn to the Master (2 Corinthians 3:16) for deliverance, even so, the elders of Gilead turned to Jephthah, and the band of men who had joined him, to deliver them from the hands of the Ammonites:

“and it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob: And they said unto Jephthah, Come and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon” (Judges 11:5-6).

Notice here, the proposal is that Jephthah would become their captain. Indeed, verse 11 describes how “the people made him head and captain over them”. It is not without coincidence that Messiah is also described as a head and captain – he is the Head of the Body, the Ecclesia (Colossians 1:18), and he is the Captain of our Salvation (Hebrews 2:10). We have accepted him as our Head and Captain, for he is able to deliver us from the greatest enemy of all – death.

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

The subject of what happened to Jephthah's daughter has been a source of debate amongst Bible Students for many years. There are those who say that it was necessary for him to literally offer her as a burnt offering to Yahweh, because that is what he had vowed to do. And there are others who contend that she was allowed to live, and serve Yahweh in the tabernacle arrangement of things. Whilst we don't claim to have all the answers, or be able to solve all of the problems involved, the present writer believes that upon a principle of morality, Jephthah did not literally offer his daughter as a burnt offering to Yahweh.

Those who advocate that he did kill his daughter point to the following passages regarding vows:

“... this is the thing which Yahweh hath commanded. If a man vow a vow unto Yahweh, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word: he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth ...” (Num. 30:2).

“When thou shalt vow a vow unto Yahweh thy God, thou shalt not be slack to pay it: for Yahweh thy God will surely require it of thee: and it would be sin in thee” (Deut. 23:21).

“When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he has no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay ...” (Eccl. 5:4-5).

The point being argued, is that once a vow had been made, it cannot be broken. Yahweh will surely require that the vow be kept.

However, as with most matters of Scripture, context is key. The vows referred to involve pledging some item or service to Yahweh—but what about if the vow was to commit a particular sin? Does a sin become the right thing to do, because the individual concerned has vowed to do it?

The Scriptures are very clear that to offer up children as burnt offerings was a practice of the heathen, and the people of God were strictly forbidden to engage in this practice:

“When Yahweh thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and dwellest in their land; take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? Even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto Yahweh thy God: for every abomination to Yahweh, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods” (Deut. 12:29-31).

To offer one's daughter up as a burnt offering then, is something that is an “abomination” to Yahweh, which he “hateth”. Does that abominable thing which He Hates become the right thing to do, if a person has vowed to do it? To ask the question is to supply the answer: the logic is surely skewed!

Again, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of this evil practice:

“... they have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind” (Jer. 19:5)

Again, the question to be asked is this: Is a vow to commit a heinous sin enforceable? Does that sin become the right thing to do if it has been vowed? The sin would have been to make the vow in the first place: to compound that sin by doing what Yahweh “hateth” in order to fulfil that vow only makes it worse.

THE ACTUAL VOW

The vow made by Jephthah is expressed in the KJV as follows:

“Jephthah vowed a vow unto Yahweh, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be Yahweh’s and I will offer it up for a burnt offering” (Jud. 11:30-31).

It is evident that he did not intend to vow to kill his daughter as a burnt offering. That was not the intent of the vow: but the question is, how could he fulfil this vow without doing what Yahweh “Hateth”? A suggested alternative rendering is that it “shall surely be Yahweh’s or I will offer it up for a burnt offering.” According to this suggestion, Jephthah’s daughter was devoted to the service of Yahweh, and was not burned upon the brazen altar.

Again, another possibility is that she could have become what the Apostle describes as “a living sacrifice”:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1).

Like Anna in the New Testament (Luke 2:36-37), she could have fulfilled her “reasonable service” before Yahweh by being devoted to worship before him in the Tabernacle. This would also help explain why she had to “bewail her virginity” before Jephthah fulfilled his vow: she was to remain a virgin for the rest of her life.

In short, we believe that for Jephthah to kill his daughter would have been to do what Yahweh “hateth” and forbade his people to do (Exo. 20:13), and the fact of a rash vow did not make such a sin the right thing to do.

As we have seen above, in the work of Jephthah, we have a shadowy type of the work of Messiah, both at a national and individual level. Just as Jephthah delivered his people out of the hands of the oppressor, even so Christ will deliver the Jews out of the hands of the future oppressor of his people, even a great confederacy of nations. But also, just as Jephthah was a captain of salvation to Israel, even so Christ is the captain of our salvation, able to deliver us from death.

All Israel looked to Jephthah, whom his brethren once despised, for deliverance. Let us therefore, trust in the Master, Jesus Christ for our deliverance from the bondage of Sin. Let us look unto him, as the Captain and perfecter of our faith, with the sure confidence that he is able to grant us the victory. And let us therefore war the same warfare in which he was engaged, that his victory might become ours, as we will be found fellow-soldiers with him, to be granted an inheritance with him, at his return.

Christopher Maddocks