

Who Was Jephthah?

The renowned Gileadite general", and Judge of Israel as we know him, was a highly complex character and a tragic hero in the true sense of those words. His story can be found in chapters 11 and 12 of the Book of Judges.

He was illegitimate. His father had other sons who were born in wedlock but Jephthah's mother was a concubine, his half-brothers refused to acknowledge him and made his life so miserable that he ran away and "lived rough" in the hills gathered a band of outlaws in Robin Hood fashion and carried on guerrilla warfare against all and sundry. This experience evidently taught him the principles of leadership and strategy. When the Ammonites started planning an attack on Israel the Gileadites sought Jephthah's help and advice. Gilead, being on the east bank of the river Jordan, would be the first to bear an attack from Ammon. Originally Jephthah turned them down. "You all turned me out and refused me a living" he said, "and now you want me to help you?" Eventually he led their forces on one condition – that after the war he would be acknowledged as their leader and chieftain for the rest of his life. The elders of Gilead had no alternative but to consent, so the battle against the Ammonites began. The result was an outstanding victory for Jephthah and his army.

The Ephraimites, were asked to help fight the Ammonites, but said no. Jephthah's was forcing him to face the Ammonites alone. He did not therefore see that Ephraim had any claim on the honors – or the plunder – of the war. The Ephraimites threatened to set fire to Jephthah's house. A battle inevitably followed this threat, and those Ephraimites who had crossed the Jordan to fight Jephthah were soundly beaten and began to retreat. This meant the Ephraimites to across the Jordan at one or other of the crossing-places or fords. Jephthah sent detachments of his army to the ford to question every man who attempted to cross the river.

Forty-two thousand killed in this conflict seems an enormous number; someone has suggested that "forty and two thousand" should really be read as 40 and 2000 making a total of 2040, but the Bible clearly indicates the larger figure is correct, as does Josephus in his writings. Having made a bargain with the elders of Gilead, Jephthah went on to make a bargain with God: If God would give him victory over the Ammonites, then the first creature to meet Jephthah on his way home would be offered as a burnt sacrifice. Jephthah was met by his only child, his darling daughter and dearest treasure. What could he do? God had apparently kept his side of the bargain. The noble daughter, on being informed of the situation, told Jephthah that of course he must keep his word, but she begged to be allowed a couple of months "to go up and down upon the mountains and bewail my virginity".

At the end of the two months she returned to her father who "did with her according to his vow". Does this mean that Jephthah really killed his only child and burnt her body as a sacrifice? Human sacrifice would have been against Israelite law. The comment "and she knew no man" has been interpreted as either "she died a virgin" or perhaps it implies that her father didn't kill her but put her in solitary confinement instead. We shall never know for certain.

Presented: 9/2/21 in Tuckahoe Lodge by:
Douglas Messimer, PM