

Judges 11: Jephthah's disturbing parable

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Judges 11 tells the story of Jephthah. I have found this story unsettling to westerners. Here is the plot: Jephthah's father married a prostitute who bore him many sons. Those sons rejected the legitimate firstborn and heir. So Jephthah went to live in Tov, which in Hebrew means "Good." Many social rejects gathered to him.

When the Ammonites warred against the people who had rejected Jephthah, the people went to him and asked him to lead them in battle. Jephthah said, "Suppose we win; will I really be your head?" They promised to submit to him.

Jephthah went to the Ammonites and asked, "Why do you dishonor me by attacking us?" The enemy claimed that the land was theirs. Jephthah argues with Middle-Eastern logic: First, when his Hebrew people asked only to pass through this land (as told in Deuteronomy), the locals refused hospitality. Second, when the Hebrews tried to bypass their land, the locals attacked them unjustly, so they won the land in battle. Third, the Hebrews' God gave them this land; if the Ammonite god did not give it to them, why should they not accept what their god gives them? Those are cultural arguments intended to show that the Ammonites were acting dishonorably.

The Ammonites refused to listen. God's Spirit came on Jephthah. He said, "Lord, if you give me victory, whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return will be sacrificed to you." Jephthah won the war.

When he returned home his only child came out to meet him. Jephthah mourned the great cost he now had to pay. But his daughter said, "Fulfill your vow. But give me two months to mourn with my friends that I will never marry." Thereafter young women each year commemorate the sacrificed child who didn't marry.

At first glance, this story does not translate into western values. I think understanding it requires three contextual points of view.

The first context is the Mid-Eastern sense on honor and dishonor: Jephthah dishonored by his people, his people dishonored by their enemies, and the child's honorable submission even to death. These carry more weight in Middle-Eastern cultures than in the pragmatic West.

The second context is the Law's prohibition of human sacrifice. Historically, we can conclude that Jephthah was following a pagan custom, not living under the Law of the Lord who had given the Hebrews this land. Ignorance of God's Word leads to bad decisions. But why, then, is Jephthah's disturbing story in the Bible?

The third context is the central plot of the Bible, fulfilled in the Savior. Notice these plot elements: A Father has a firstborn who is rejected by his dishonorable family (as Jesus was rejected). The Son leaves his home, and many other rejects gather to him (as Jesus did). The people, realizing their need for a Savior, promise to follow him as their Head (which is true of all those in Christ's Kingdom). The price of victory is the sacrifice of an only child (as the death of God's one and only Son redeems his people from their sin). That sin was rooted in the rejection of the legitimate heir in the first place (in both stories). The only child willingly submits to death

with the reminder that her marriage will go unconsummated (just as the King's Son awaits the consummation of his Kingdom and his bride). People remember the only child's sacrifice (as God's people remember the sacrifice of Jesus).

Jephthah's historical event is a living parable, foreshadowing the ultimate story of the Bible centuries before it happened.

It is not uncommon for western people to bristle at ideas which violate our legalistic values--arguing that we are less guilty or more innocent than someone else, ever seeking to justify ourselves. But we are somewhat blind to our dishonorable actions, and in that blindness we can miss the salvation story rather than display it.