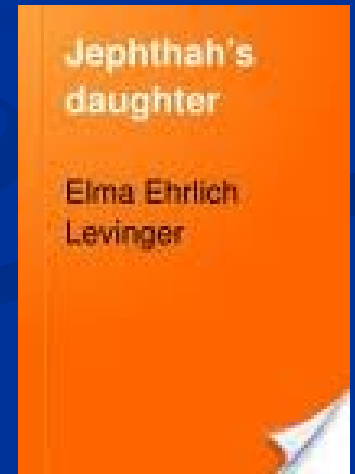
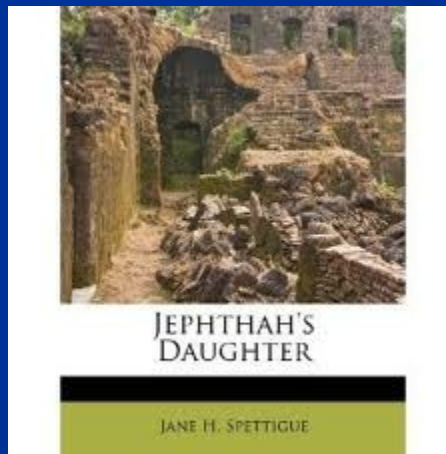
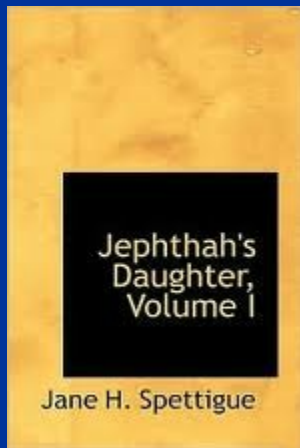


# Jephthah and his daughter

by **Tim Bench**

From the Book of Judges, Chapter 11



Artwork from the  
*Speculum Humanae  
Salvationis*, 14<sup>th</sup> century.

“This manuscript was reproduced widely and was wildly popular, such that the theme of Jephthah's daughter as a type of the Virgin Mary was widespread in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries...”, by Lois Drewer and "Jephthah and His Daughter in Medieval Art: Ambiguities of Heroism and Sacrifice." 2002, pages 35-59.



**J**ephthah immolavit filiam suam Jhuditham  
filia jephthae oblata est pro victoria hostium tyralium  
Et per mare facta est victoria hostium infernalium  
Illa indistricte oblata est domino quia postea fuisse cognovit  
Quia pro oblatione sua se domino servavit  
Certe quae domino servavit se dicitur servavit



**Pieter Vecchia (Italian, Venice, 1603-1678)  
*Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter*, c. 1650-1666  
Oil on canvas, 30-1/2 X 54-1/4"  
Gift of Morton and Mary Jane Harris in honor  
of the staff of the Palmer Museum of Art, 93.14**

# Jephthah and his daughter

- This story is one of the most controversial, debated, and (for many people) unsettling stories in the entire Bible.
- Did Jephthah actually offer his own daughter as a human sacrifice to God? Or was the daughter assigned to the Tabernacle, the remainder of her life spent in celibate service to God? What does this story teach us about making vows to God?
- We will attempt to study each of these scenarios and apply what we learn to our lives today.

# **“Jephthah: Artificial Excuse For Unbelief”**

**by Bill Moore**

- “For some, the story of Jephthah has an element that reduces the credibility of the Bible. The story has most often been brought into discussions I've been part of when a person is trying to justify his distaste for the Bible in general or the Old Testament in particular.”

# Background on Jephthah

- Jephthah is a major character in the Book of Judges. He served as a judge over Israel for a duration of 6 years (Judges 12:7). He lived in Gilead (also his father's name) and was a member of the Tribe of Manasseh. He was the son of a prostitute and was disinherited by his father (see Judges 11:1-2).
- Jephthah leads the Israelites in battle v. the Ammonites; he defeats them handily after having made a rash vow...

# Jephthah's vow (Judges 11:29-40)

- “Then the spirit of the Lord came over Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon.
- And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands,
- The 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 the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

# Judges 11:29-40

- So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the Lord delivered them into his hands.
- And he smote them from Aroer, even till thou come to Minnith, even twenty cities, and unto the plain of the vineyards, with a very great slaughter. Thus the children of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.



# Jephthah's daughter

- And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; and she was his only child, beside her he had neither son nor daughter.
- And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! Thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back.



■ **“The Return of Jephthah”**

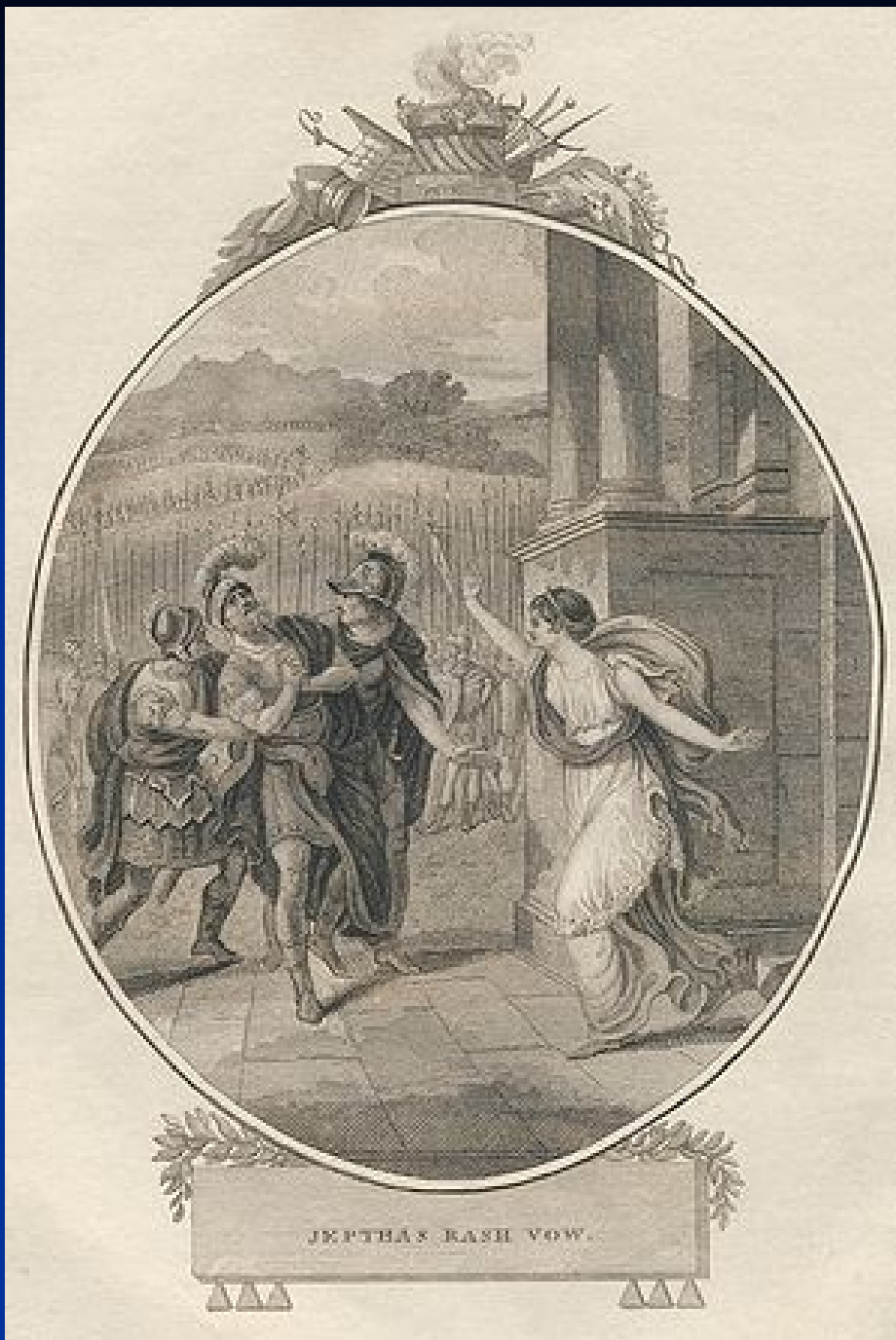
■ **Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini**

# Jephthah's daughter

- And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as the Lord hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon.
- And she said unto her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows.

# The daughter departs

- And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months: and she went with her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains.
- And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Israel.
- That the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.”



- **“Jephthah’s Rash Vow”**
- **By James Gundee and M. Jones, 1807.**

# Summary

- Jephthah makes a rash vow to sacrifice the first to greet him when he returns home. To his horror, it is his daughter who greets him.
- Jephthah, although devastated, tells his daughter of his vow and what he must do. She agrees with the caveat that she is able to spend two months in the mountains with her friends lamenting her virginity.
- At the end of two months, she returns, and Jephthah “did with her according to his vow which he had vowed...”. Afterwards, the daughter’s friends went on an annual trek to lament their lost friend.

# A human sacrifice to God?

- Tremendous controversy and debate has gone on for decades over this issue...
- According to Mosaic Law, once a vow is made to God, it must be kept no matter the cost or the consequences (see Deuteronomy 23:21-23). In fact, it is better to make no vow at all to God rather than make a vow and fail to fulfill your part of the deal.

# A human sacrifice to God?

- However, a human sacrifice to God is a strict violation of Old Testament Law (see Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5, and Deuteronomy 12:31 and 18:10). Additionally, sacrifices made to God were to be male (see Leviticus 22:18-19). Thus, by definition, Jephthah's vow violated the Old Testament in two separate ways.
- The specific term used in 11:31 is 'olah, the standard Hebrew word for "a burnt offering"; thus, many people interpret Jephthah as having offered his daughter as a human sacrifice.



# As per Josephus

- “He (Jephthah) sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering; offering such an oblation as was neither comfortable to the law, nor acceptable to God: not weighing with himself what opinion the hearers would have of such a practice.”
- Excerpt from *The Genuine Works of Flavuis Josephus, The Jewish Historian*, William Whiston, pages 117-118.

# The Sacrifice

- We are told that this daughter was the only child of Jephthah.
- Not only would he have to bear the incomprehensible agony of sacrificing her, but Jephthah's family line would be thus terminated.
- Jephthah, despite this tale and its traditional interpretation, *is listed as a man of faith in the New Testament (see Hebrews 11:32).*

# Was the daughter literally sacrificed as a “burnt offering”?

- Many scholars today argue that she was not, and that this difficult story hinges on an analysis of the original Hebrew in which the text was written....
- For example, the translated “and” in Judges 13:1 should be, according to many scholars, properly translated as “or”. Thus, “whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, AND I will offer it up...” becomes “whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me....shall surely be the Lord’s, OR I will offer it up as a burnt offering..” (see “Great Clouds of Witnesses in Hebrew II” by E.W. Bullinger).
- The difference in the wording is huge....Jephthah, according to this view, stated that the first to greet him upon his return would thus be sacrificed OR given to the Lord for service. In other words, the daughter’s fate was not to be death, but to be given over the service to God and a life of perpetual virginity (a comparable example is Anna in Luke 2:27).

# Was the daughter literally sacrificed as a “burnt offering”?

- Supporters of this view cite that the daughter did not wail and/or grieve for her impending death, as might be expected, but instead grieved over her virginity and the fact that she would never become a mother. Note the verse stating she “knew no man”; this seems obviously to highlight her virginity and would have been a bizarre insertion of wording if the girl was soon to die.

# Further support for the daughter being in lifelong service to God...

- “In any case, it should have been unlawful, and repugnant to Jehovah, to offer a human being to Him as a burnt-offering, for His acceptance. Such offerings were common to heathen nations at the time, but it is noteworthy that Israel stands out among them with this great peculiarity, that human sacrifices were unknown in Israel.”
- From *Great Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrew II* by E.W. Bullinger.
- See also “Did Jephthah Kill his daughter?” by Solomon Landers in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, August 1991.

# Jeff Hamilton at

[www.lavistachurchofchrist.org](http://www.lavistachurchofchrist.org).

- “His daughter rightly encouraged her father to keep his vow. She just asked for two months to bewail her virginity (Judges 11:38). Notice that she did not grieve over her short life because her life wasn't coming to an end. When Jephthah fulfilled his vow, it is noted that she never had sexual relations with a man (Judges 11:39). There is no mention of her losing her life because of her father's vow, nor is there any need to make such an assumption. Only sacrificial animals could be placed on the altar. Everything else was either redeemed or placed into service for God.  
(continued)

# Jeff Hamilton at [www.lavistachurchofchrist.org](http://www.lavistachurchofchrist.org).

- What would Jephthah's daughter do in service to God? I'm sure there were many jobs the Levite women did which Jephthah's daughter could have joined in doing. There are two verses mentioning women who served at the door of the tabernacle (Exodus 38:8; I Samuel 2:22). From John 18:16-17 and other ancient sources it appears that women were frequently employed as doorkeepers. Some believe that women vowed to God became the source of these workers. There is also mention of the widow Anna who stayed at the temple and served the Lord with fasting and prayers (Luke 2:36-37), like those mentioned in Psalm 134.”

# Human sacrifices opposed by God

- “It would be a bit bizarre for Jephthah to think that he could elicit God’s favor in battle by promising to offer Him a human sacrifice, that is, to do something that was in direct violation of the will of God. Such a proposal would be equivalent to a person requesting God’s blessing and assistance by offering to rape women or rob banks.”
- “Jephthah was offering to sacrifice a member of his extended household to permanent, religious service associated with the Tabernacle.”
- *Scripturally Speaking* by Dave Miller, Ph.D., [www.apologeticpress.org](http://www.apologeticpress.org).



## James Burton Coffman Commentary, from ACU Press

- “We are very aware of the dogmatic assertions of many commentators that Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt-offering, but we simply cannot accept such assertions as truth.... There is not a word in this narrative that declares any "burnt-offering" to have been offered. Furthermore, if Jephthah had actually intended to offer up a human being as a burnt-offering, as a number of commentators affirm, can we believe that God would have allowed the victory to go to a man thus in open rebellion against what is everywhere revealed in the Bible as God's will? (continued)

# James Burton Coffman

## Commentary, from ACU Press

- This writer is fully convinced that Jephthah's loving daughter was dedicated to a life of service in the tabernacle and that that action was indeed the complete fulfillment of his vow.”
- Commentary on Judges, see at [www.studyLight.org](http://www.studyLight.org).

## *The two opposite views*

- Even today amongst Christians, there exists a wide chasm in views of what Jephthah actually did to his daughter.....either sacrificing her as an offering to God or relegating her to lifelong service to God.
- Here are some supporting arguments for each view...

# The daughter sacrificed

- 1. Jephthah's vow in Judges 11:31 that he will offer as a "burnt offering" whatever appears to him first when he arrives home.
- 2. Judges 11:39, which says that Jephthah "did with her according to his vow which he had vowed...".
- 3. The fact that the girl's friends gathered annually for a four-day period of lament, arguably over her death.
- 4. Many commentaries argue that an actual sacrifice is the only plausible alternative....for example, the Jamieson, Fausett, and Brown's commentary states "...there is but too much reason to conclude that he was impelled to the fulfillment by the dictates of a pious but unenlightened conscience." (page 195).



# Steve Hamilton at [www.battlecreekcoc.org](http://www.battlecreekcoc.org).

- “It is correctly argued that God finds human sacrifices detestable (**Deut. 12:31**). However, we must keep in mind that Jephthah made the vow to God. God neither required the vow nor desired it but Jephthah on his own accord made it. *“When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth”* (**Deut. 23:21-23**). Jephthah did not sin in making the vow. However, he would have sinned if he failed to keep his vow. *“When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed-Better not to vow than to vow and not pay”* (**Eccl. 5:4-5**). (continued)

# “Jephthah’s Vow”

- Such vows were not unique in the Old Testament. After Aaron’s death, King Arad, the Canaanite, attacked at Mount Hor. *“So Israel made a vow to the LORD, and said, ‘If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities. And the LORD listened to the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their cities. So the name of that place was called Hormah’”* (Numbers 21:2-3). Hormah literally means utter destruction. How many innocent children died as a result of this vow? Surely, it was more than one daughter...
- We might not like the fact that this story ends with an innocent person being sacrificed for her father’s promise. But then again, wasn’t Christ an innocent person who was sacrificed for His Father’s promise (Gal.3:16-17)?”

# John Davis at

[www.owensborochurchofchrist.com](http://www.owensborochurchofchrist.com).

- “...Jephthah, upon returning, should never have killed his daughter. God would never want us to sacrifice a person (especially our own child) in worship of him. That’s what the pagan nations used to do in worship of false gods and God *hated* it (see Lev. 20:1-5). Jephthah could have paid 20 shekels to the priest to release his daughter from the vow (see Lev. 27:1-8), but he went ahead and killed her anyway. This was evil resulting from a foolish vow.”



# The daughter dedicated to service to God

- 1. “She knew no man” is stated after Jephthah “did” “that which he had vowed.” Many suggest that this comment about her virginity would have been pointless if she had been put to death.
- 2. Human sacrifices were a direct violation of Scripture.
- 3. Sacrifices, when they were made, were to be male.
- 4. The daughter’s sadness and time in the mountains could be explained by the realization that she would never be able to marry, have children, etc.

# “Jephthah’s Vow” by Maurice Barnett

- “Nowhere in the text does it say that he actually killed, dismembered and offered his daughter as a burnt offering to Jehovah. To the contrary. Note that it says *“he did according to his vow and she knew not a man.”* There is no doubt that the second part is a consequence of the first part in anyone’s interpretation. That fits only a consecration to Jehovah, not a burnt offering. It does not say that *“he did according to his vow and killed her.”* To reinforce nothing but the opinion of the translators, without justification, the New English Bible renders it, “she died a virgin.”  
(continued)

## “Jephthah’s Vow” by Maurice Barnett

- As has been said by others, one only bewails what they lose or are about to lose. She was losing a married life and children, a life’s fulfillment for an Israelite woman. Being dead, she certainly would not know a man. If his intention was to kill her, it would be as ridiculous as saying he did according to his vow and she never scratched her nose again. Well, she couldn’t scratch her nose, eat, or do anything else, if she were dead. And, why go away to bewail her virginity and not her death?”

# What about Abraham and Isaac?

- Proponents on both sides cite this story from Genesis 22...Abraham is told by God to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him (so some say that human sacrifices were at least possible in God's view).
- However, Abraham's hand is stayed from killing his son at the last possible moment, which others argue provides proof that God does not desire human sacrifices, after all.

# What about Abraham and Isaac?

- It is interesting to note that Abraham is told to provide a “burnt offering” in Genesis 22:2; the Hebrew word in this verse is again ‘olah. We know that Abraham had every intention of offering Isaac as an actual physical sacrifice, so since ‘olah appears both here as well as in the example of Jephthah, it seems logical to assume that an actual physical sacrifice would be the scenario in Jephthah’s case.
- However, again quoting from the Jamieson and Fausett Commentary in regard to the question of “and” v. “or” in Judges 11:31....”The adoption of the latter particle, many interpreters suggest, introduces the important alternative, that if it were a person, the dedication would be made to the service of the sanctuary; if a proper animal or thing, it would be offered on the altar.”

# Are there lessons from this unusual story that can apply to us today?

- 1. A vow/pact with God is not to be broken, regardless of how foolish or rash it may be. When we make a vow to God, we must do everything we can to insure that we hold up our end of the pact, no matter the cost. How many of us during our lives have said something along the lines of “God, if you will help me out of this mess, I swear I will never \_\_\_\_\_ again”?
- 2. We must be willing to sacrifice anything in our lives, no matter how beloved it may be, to serve God. Jephthah was willing to lose his daughter, either to death or to her departure to serve God into perpetuity; we may be forced to have our own relatives and loved ones turn against us (see Luke 12:53) or lose even our earthly riches and possessions (see Mark 10:21-30). Jephthah was willing to lose, one way or another, his most beloved possession (his daughter) to ensure that he served and obeyed God.