

Judges

Chapter 11

Jephthah Delivers Israel

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. 2 And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." 3 Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him. 4 After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. 5 And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. 6 And they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites." 7 But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?" 8 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." 9 Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head." 10 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say." 11 So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah. 12 Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" 13 And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." 14 Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites 15 and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, 16 but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. 17 Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let us pass through your land,' but the king of Edom would not listen. And they sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. 18 "Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab. 19 Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, 'Please let us pass through your land to our country,' 20 but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory, so Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. 21 And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. 22 And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. 23 So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? 24 Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess. 25 Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever contend against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them? 26 While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time? 27 I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of

Ammon.” 28 But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.

11:1 *a mighty warrior.* Lit, “a mighty one of power.” A man who possessed bravery and military means to accomplish great things (TLSB)

son of a prostitute. Therefore Jephthah was a social outcast. (CSB)

Circumstances of Jephthah’s birth made him socially disadvantaged, since he likely had no father to care for him. As Israel’s spiritual condition continued to spiral downward, the men selected by the Lord to become judges possessed fewer ideal qualities. (TLSB)

11:2 *wife’s sons.* Legal heirs. (TLSB)

11:3 *Tob.* The men of Tob were later allied with the Ammonites against David (2Sa 10:6–8). (CSB)

the land of Tob. Volcanic highlands east of Bashan, north of Gilead. (TLSB)

worthless fellows. Opportunists who were distressed, discontented, in debt, or outcasts found in Jephthah a man of similar circumstances. (TLSB)

11:5–6 *Come and be our leader.* Village elders could offer leadership during times of peace and would normally disdain people like Jephthah. But the Ammonite threat made them desperate. (TLSB)

leader. A military commander. (TLSB)

11:7 *hate me and drive me out of my father’s house?* Elders served as judges in a community Jephthah had a grudge against their judgment. Whether rightly or wrongly, he lost his inheritance due to their decisions. One or more of the elders could have been Jephthah’s brothers (cf v 2). (TLSB)

Why ... me now. Jephthah’s rhetorical questions demonstrate his shrewd negotiating ability. He took advantage of the elders’ desperation to negotiate an agreement more favorable to himself. (TLSB)

11:8 *be our head.* In addition to their initial offer of military command during the war with Ammon (v. 6), the Gileadites now also offer to make Jephthah regional head after the fighting is over. (CSB)

Elders sweetened their offer, adding more comprehensive leadership. (TLSB)

11:9 *the LORD gives them over to me.* While not reluctant to advance his own position, Jephthah commendably ascribed ultimate victory to the Lord. (TLSB)

11:10 *The LORD will be witness.* Elders are making a covenant. Jephthah will recount Israel’s history to the Ammonite messengers in covenant format. (TLSB)

11:11 The proposal of the elders was ratified by the people, a process followed in the election of Saul (1Sa 11:15), Rehoboam (1Ki 12:1) and Jeroboam (1Ki 12:20). (CSB)

the people made him head. By public rite. (TLSB)

head and leader. Jephthah received the level of leadership he had negotiated. (TLSB)

before the LORD at Mizpah. Jephthah took an oath at the same place as did Jacob (Gn 31:48–54). (TLSB)

11:12 *Jephthah sent messengers.* The only instance in Jgs of an effort at diplomacy before the exercising of a military option. (TLSB)

against my land? Jephthah claimed that land east of the Jordan rightfully belonged to Israel and to him. (TLSB)

11:13 *my land.* When the Israelites had first approached Canaan, this area was ruled by the Amorite king Sihon, who had taken it from the Moabites (Nu 21:29). The Ammonites had since become dominant over Moab and now claimed all previous Moabite territory. (CSB)

The Ammonite king countered that the land east of the Jordan was Ammon’s possession, not Israel’s, because the Ammonites had a more ancient claim to it. (TLSB)

11:14–27 Jephthah responded in accordance with international policies of the time; his letter is a classic example of contemporary international correspondence. It also reflects—and appeals to—the common recognition that the god(s) of a people established and protected their political boundaries and decided all boundary disputes. Jephthah’s defense of Israel’s claim to the land is threefold: (1) Israel took it from Sihon king of the Amorites, not from the Ammonites (vv. 15–22); (2) the Lord gave the land to Israel (vv. 23–25); (3) Israel had long possessed it (vv. 26–27). (CSB)

Jephthah’s reply reveals a remarkable knowledge of history and of the Lord’s covenant with Israel. The Ammonites’ charge against Israel rings hollow; Ammon was living on land the Moabites could claim legitimately. Jephthah recounts how Israel had first sought permission to pass through the historic territories of the Edomites, Moabites, and Amorites, but were not granted it. Permission denied, Israel took the longer route around Moab and established camp beyond Moabite territory. Jephthah refers only to those facts that strengthen his claim. He implies that though Israel had respected Moabite boundaries, other local peoples (the generalized term “Amorites”) must have violated those boundaries in order to have come into possession of this area. (TLSB)

11:21 *LORD, the God of Israel.* War was viewed not only in military terms but also as a contest between deities (see v. 24; Ex 12:12; Nu 33:4). (CSB)

11:23 *the LORD ... dispossessed the Amorites.* “To the victors belong the spoils”; thus neighboring peoples understood that if Israel was victorious in battle, it had legitimate claim to the land. (TLSB)

11:24 *Chemosh.* Reference to Chemosh, the chief deity of the Moabites, indicates either that at this time the king of Ammon also ruled Moab or that there was a military confederacy of the two peoples. (CSB)

The god of the Moabites; the god of the Ammonites was Milcom/Molech. Jephthah did not acknowledge the existence of other gods, but was making a legal claim on terms the Ammonites would be forced to concede. (TLSB)

11:25 *Balak.* Though Moab had more legitimate claims to the land than Ammon, Balak, the king of Moab, never made such a claim. (TLSB)

11:26 *Heshbon ... Aroer ... villages ... cities.* Land formerly belonging to Moab. (TLSB)

three hundred years. For the relevance of this phrase in establishing the time span for Judges. (CSB)

Since the Israelites had been living there for three centuries with no counter claim from Moab or Ammon, what claim did the king of Ammon think he had on those lands now? Jephthah's round figure corroborates the understanding that the judges period lasted c 350 years, and supports the reference in 1Ki 6:1 that the time period from the exodus to the 40-year reign of Solomon was 480 years. (TLSB)

11:27 *decide this day.* See 1Sa 24:15. As the divine Judge, the Lord is the final court of appeal. It is significant that in the book of Judges the singular noun "judge" is found only here, where it is used of the Lord, Israel's true Judge. (CSB)

Whatever "legitimacy" he appeared to grant to the gods of Moab and Ammon, Jephthah confessed that the Lord was the God who would settle this dispute—if not through Jephthah's diplomacy, then through military victory. (TLSB)

11:28 The Ammonite king's refusal to listen set the stage for Jephthah's military victory, which also became the occasion for one of the most well known and controversial events in the Book. (TLSB)

11:1–28 Despite his outcast status, Jephthah is selected to lead the Israelite armies against the Ammonites. He argues that Israel has proper claim to the lands east of the Jordan after living there three centuries. God's people today, too, have a homeland that the Lord has appointed: the promised land of the new creation. Christians may appear an unimportant minority on earth, with no particular claim to power, and losing influence as society becomes more and more secular. Yet God still guides the affairs of the world in the interest of His people. • Lord God, ruler over the nations, encourage us when we seem to be surrounded and overwhelmed by an ungodly world. Prepare us for our eternal homeland, which we will enter when Jesus returns. Amen. (TLSB)

Jephthah's Tragic Vow

29 Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. **30** And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, **31** then whatever[a] comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it[b] up for a burnt offering." **32** So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. **33** And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. **34** Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. **35** And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow." **36** And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites." **37** So she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions." **38** So he said, "Go." Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. **39** And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a

custom in Israel 40 that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

11:29 *Spirit of the LORD.* In the OT the unique empowering of the Spirit was given to an individual primarily to enable him to carry out the special responsibilities God had given him. (CSB)

The Lord's Spirit made Jephthah bold to pursue the Ammonites in battle but did not prevent him from making an impulsive decision (v 30). (TLSB)

11:30 *made a vow.* A common practice among the Israelites (see Ge 28:20; 1Sa 1:11; 2Sa 15:8). The precise nature of this vow has been the subject of wide speculation, but v. 31 indicates the promise of a burnt offering and leads to the conclusion that Jephthah probably offered his daughter as a human sacrifice (v. 39). A vow was not to be broken (see Nu 30:2; Dt 23:21–23; see also Ecc 5:4–5). (CSB)

Common practice among the Israelites; once made, it was not to be broken. Whether as a calculated risk or with reckless abandon, Jephthah must have sought additional assurance of the Lord's blessing. Could a man who knew the Law of the Lord as well as Jephthah appears to have known it (cf vv 14–27) have been ignorant of the Lord's opposition to human sacrifice? As a social outcast and the son of a prostitute, Jephthah may have assimilated heathen beliefs and practices. (TLSB)

11:31 *whatever comes out.* Rash vow, which can only lead to trouble. Throughout the passage, the pronouns are masculine, indicating that Jephthah did not expect it to be his daughter. (TLSB)

shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up. Some Hbr grammarians translate "and" as "or." Jephthah's wording may suggest a different course of action if met by a person or by an animal. (TLSB)

11:33 *Aroer.* Near the Arnon River; marks the southern edge of the territory Ammon had invaded. (TLSB)

Minnith. Location unknown. *Abel-keramim.* C 12 mi from Rabbah, the Ammonite capital. (TLSB)

11:34 *dances.* It was customary for women to greet armies returning victoriously from battle in this way (see Ex 15:20; 1Sa 18:6). (CSB)

11:35 *tore his clothes.* A common practice for expressing extreme grief. (CSB)

very low ... great trouble. Men go to war to protect their wives and children, not to put them in harm's way. But in this case, his victory tore apart his family. (TLSB)

11:36 His daughter's gentle spirit and willing submission is extraordinary, like that of Mary (Lk 1:38). (TLSB)

11:37 *two months.* Possessing greater presence of mind than did her father, she requested an extended time to bewail her fate with her female friends. (TLSB)

weep for my virginity. To be kept from marrying and rearing children was a bitter prospect for an Israelite girl. (CSB)

It seems unusual that she would bewail her virginity rather than her impending death. Because she was his only child, his family line would be cut off with her death. It is possible that he offered her or dedicated her to perpetual service at the tabernacle, such that she could not marry. Cf 1Sm 2:22. (TLSB)

11:39 *custom in Israel.* Probably a local custom, since no other mention of it is found in the OT. (CSB)

Cf vv 30–31. Jewish commentators, first-century historian Flavius Josephus, and Christian Church Fathers believed that Jephthah did indeed offer his daughter as a burnt offering. In other biblical texts, there were methods of substitution (e.g., the Lord accepted a ram caught in a thicket as a substitute for Isaac; Gn 22:13). The firstborn of every womb, spared by the Lord when He passed over Israelite homes in Egypt, belonged to the Lord but could be redeemed by the Levites, who were assigned to lifetime service (Ex 13:1–2; Nu 3:11–13). (TLSB)

11:40 *lament ... four days.* Though heartfelt and sorrowful at the time, this observance apparently did not endure. (TLSB)

11:29–40 Jephthah’s carefully crafted speech and military victory over the Ammonites are overshadowed by his rash vow to sacrifice the first thing that comes out to him from his doorway—which turns out to be his only child. Beware the foolishness of making vows or swearing in frivolous or uncertain situations. We can be thankful that Jesus offered Himself as payment for all our thoughtless words and foolish actions. • Forgive us, O Lord, for the thoughtless and foolish words that we speak. Guide us to speak the truth of Your Word in love. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen. (TLSB)