

# **Judges**

## **Chapter 11**

Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute.<sup>2</sup> Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman."<sup>3</sup> So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him.<sup>4</sup> Some time later, when the Ammonites made war on Israel,<sup>5</sup> the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob.<sup>6</sup> "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."<sup>7</sup> Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?"<sup>8</sup> The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be our head over all who live in Gilead."<sup>9</sup> Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?"<sup>10</sup> The elders of Gilead replied, "The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say."<sup>11</sup> So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.<sup>12</sup> Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: "What do you have against us that you have attacked our country?"<sup>13</sup> The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah's messengers, "When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably."<sup>14</sup> Jephthah sent back messengers to the Ammonite king,<sup>15</sup> saying: "This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites.<sup>16</sup> But when they came up out of Egypt, Israel went through the desert to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh.<sup>17</sup> Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Give us permission to go through your country,' but the king of Edom would not listen. They sent also to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh.<sup>18</sup> "Next they traveled through the desert, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border.<sup>19</sup> "Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, 'Let us pass through your country to our own place.'<sup>20</sup> Sihon, however, did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He mustered all his men and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel.<sup>21</sup> "Then the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his men into Israel's hands, and they defeated them. Israel took over all the land of the Amorites who lived in that country,<sup>22</sup> capturing all of it from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the desert to the Jordan.<sup>23</sup> "Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over?<sup>24</sup> Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has

given us, we will possess. <sup>25</sup> Are you better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever quarrel with Israel or fight with them? <sup>26</sup> For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn't you retake them during that time? <sup>27</sup> I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites." <sup>28</sup> The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. <sup>30</sup> And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, <sup>31</sup> whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." <sup>32</sup> Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands. <sup>33</sup> He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon. <sup>34</sup> When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. <sup>35</sup> When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break." <sup>36</sup> "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. <sup>37</sup> But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry." <sup>38</sup> "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. <sup>39</sup> After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite custom <sup>40</sup> that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

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

*his mother was 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)

*adventurers.* See note on 9:4. (CSB)

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)

**11:16** *Kadesh.* Kadesh Barnea; see note on Nu 20:1. (CSB)

**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.* See Nu 22–24. (CSB)

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 see Introduction: Background. (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** *Judge.* 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)

**11:29** *Spirit of the LORD.* See note on 3:10. 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** *dancing*. 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 (see Ge 37:34 and note). (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)

*vow*. Cf vv 30–31. (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)

*I will never marry*. 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** *Israelite custom.* 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)