

JUDGES 9-11 ABIMELECH, TOLA, JAIR; JEPHTAH AND HIS VOW

After the death of Gideon, the fifth judge, who ruled and maintained peace in Israel for 40 years, there is now a leadership vacuum. No other judges appear from God and as their father had done before, none of Gideon's 70 sons accepted being made king, so they decided to have a joint rule. Yet, as the saying goes, "Too many chefs spoil the broth" and consensus among the 70 in order to rule is virtually impossible. Soon, there was general discontent in the region with this "government by committee."

Into this difficult political situation enters Abimelech, a son of Gideon by a concubine (Judges 8:31). He takes advantage of the discontent and appeals to the frustrations and ambitions of the Shechemites, his mother's kinsmen. Shechem was situated between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, and lay on several important caravan routes.

He asked them if they preferred to be ineptly ruled by these 70 sons of Gideon or by someone that was their kinsman and also descended from Gideon, though without hereditary rights. He won them over, and they gave him money from their idolatrous Canaanite temple to hire "worthless and reckless men" willing to become cold-blooded assassins.

So Abimelech came with these men and others from Shechem to Ophra, Gideon's hometown and the center of government, on a pretended visit to his 70 half-brothers. They didn't suspect anything was wrong until it was too late, and his henchmen quickly slew all of them except for the youngest half-brother, named Jotham, who was able to hide.

When Abimelech returned to Shechem, instead of being punished for the terrible and cold-blooded massacre, he was proclaimed a hero by the Shechemites! This shows how corrupt the political and religious situation in Israel had become. And to top it off, they crowned him as king—an twisted reward for having killed 69 half-brothers, a crime called *fratricide*. He thus became Israel's first king—although it would be a short-lived and bad reign.

When Jotham heard Abimelech had been made king, he courageously went to Shechem and climbed the 800 foot Mount Gerizim, and then gave them an allegory to warn them of what they had done, and pronounced a terrible curse. He compared his dead brothers to noble and fruitful trees, such as olive, fig, and vine, who had refused to rule Israel. He then likens Abimelech to a useless thornbush, and

someone who had the audacity to be named king. He warns the Shechemites that coming under the rule of Abimelech was like seeking shelter under a thornbush—they would end up being pricked all over by his illegitimate rule. He reminded them of the pact they had made "honorably and in good faith" (9:19) with Gideon and his family. He then predicts those involved in the heinous crime would mutually destroy each other. Having finished his short speech, he quickly fled to escape capture. By the way, we have here a verse showing wine drunk in moderation is fine since it "cheers both *God* and men" (9:13).

Then, after three years, God acts and brings "a spirit of evil will" between Abimelech and his people, the tribe of Manasseh. He would later use this same method against a disobedient king Saul.

By now, Abimelech's abusive rule and blood guilt had caused those Shechemites who were not involved in the killings to rebel. To spite him, they started robbing the caravans under his protection.

Then, Gaal and his men stirred up trouble in Shechem and were gladly accepted by the inhabitants. He celebrated this event with a riotous festival in honor of Baal with the town people. When Zebul, who Abimelech had placed over Shechem, found out the intention of Gaal to take over the city, he advised the king to take immediate action and to ambush them by night. The king carried it out and Gaal and his men were utterly defeated.

But Abimelech foolishly insisted on further punishing the city for their lack of loyalty. So in his rage, he ambushed those in the fields and forced his way into the city, killing everyone in sight. Those that fled into the fortress tower were burned alive when he set it on fire. He then tore down the buildings and sowed the ground with salt to symbolize the utter destruction of the city and its perpetual infertility. In fact, Shechem was not rebuilt for almost two centuries until the reign of Jeroboam, (1 Kings 12:25). Proverbs 30:21-22 warns what happens when a servant or an unprepared man rules--the end result will be dissention and destruction.

After this, Abimelech tries to quell another rebellion at Thebez, ten miles northeast of Shechem (9:50). He easily took the city proper, but the people fled to their tower fortress. When Abimelech tried to set another fire to burn them alive, he was struck by a

millstone thrown with amazing accuracy by a woman (Judges 9:53).

The "upper millstone" mentioned here actually is the smaller stone that rolls back and forth over the larger lower millstone as the grain was crushed. Since grinding wheat was the work of women, the woman doubtless took the stone with her as a potential weapon. Since dying at the hand of a woman was considered a disgrace, he ordered his armor-bearer to kill him immediately. Yet long after his death, the credit continued to be given to this woman (see 2 Sam 11:21).

With Abimelech dead, his men gave up the battle and returned home. The Bible adds, "Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers. And all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham" (9:56-57).

The next judge God raised up was Tola, who ruled for 23 years, and his rule probably overlapped that of Jair, though Tola's began first.

Jair, the next judge, was in charge of Gilead (10:4), east of the Jordan. Like Tola, he was named after a renowned figure--Jair son of Segub, the great-great-grandson of Manasseh who captured sixty cities in Bashan. He ruled for 22 years and had thirty sons who had thirty donkeys to ride on, showing he was quite wealthy, since only the royalty and the rich rode donkeys of this kind (Gen 49:11; Zech 9:9).

After this, Israel's apostatizes again and the oppression comes both from the eastern and western flanks—on the east from the Ammonites and on the west from the Philistines. Not only were the Israelites worshiping the local deities of Baal and Ashtoreth, but now also the Moabite deity Chemosh, the Ammonite god Milcom and the Philistine Dagon.

When it became unbearable, the Israelites cried out to God and confessed their sins (10:10). He chides them for only calling on Him for emergencies and refuses to help. He contrasts their disobedience with His own faithfulness in delivering them from at least seven oppressors. Then Israel shows genuine repentance by casting out their idols, returning to obedience of His laws and earnestly praying to Him.

So God has mercy on them and raises up Jephthah as the next judge. He was a brave man from a prominent family in Gilead. Yet, being the son of a harlot he was despised by his half-brothers who didn't want him to inherit anything. They got the

town elders to persecute him until he fled to Tob, a remote area, some 15 miles south of Ramoth Gilead where he joined a band of "misfits"--the same word used of the men Abimelech hired. But in reality, Jephthah was more like David by molding a difficult group into an effective fighting force and by developing a deep and abiding faith in God.

When the armies of Ammon attacked Israel, the elders of Gilead looked for a strong and brave leader. They turned to Jephthah since he was a courageous and cunning warrior and visited him at Tob. But he was still hurting from his expulsion and reminded them of his humiliation. The elders assured him they were sorry and offered him to rule over all Gilead after the battle. He was astonished at their offer but was convinced by their willingness to take an oath. He knew if victory lay ahead, it would be from God. So when he returned with the leaders to Mizpah and confirmed his intentions "before the Lord" (11:11) as the agreement with Gilead was sealed.

At first, Jephthah tried to avoid war and negotiate a peace with the Ammonites (11:12). The king of the Ammonites insisted they must return all "occupied territory." Since the disputed land laid between the Arnon and the Jabbok rivers, Jephthah sent back a detailed explanation of how Israel obtained possession of that region. This historical summary attempts to prove that Israel captured this land from the Amorites without violating the territorial rights of either Moab or Ammon. The 300 years mentioned here since the conquest places Jephthah's time around 1100 B.C., an important historical marker. Yet, despite this detailed argument, the king of Ammon was not convinced and prepares for war with Israel.

As in the case of Gideon, the spirit of God fills Jephthah with power and he travels north, gathering troops from the tribes of Gad and Manasseh. He wants to defeat the Ammonites so much he makes a foolish vow to the God. He said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that 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 as a burnt offering" (11:31). Though intended as an act of devotion, it showed a lack of faith in God's enabling power, who did not need an unnecessary vow and sacrifice to carry out His will.

God gave Israel a stunning victory over the large Ammonite army, and Israel was able to capture

twenty cities. Thus the bulk of the region between the Arnon and the Jabbok once again belonged to Israel.

But the flush of victory gave way to bitter despair when Jephthah was greeted by his daughter, leaping and dancing, like Miriam and the women of Israel who had celebrated the triumph of the Red Sea. But as the first to leave his house, she came under the terms of this foolish vow.

What happened? Gleeson Archer, professor of Old Testament, explains, "The nature of Jephthah's vow has been much misunderstood...As Delitzsch points out, the whole record of the manner in which this vow was carried out points to her dedication to the service of the Lord as a lifelong ministrant at the national sanctuary. Judges 11:37-38 states that she was allowed a mourning period of two months, not to bewail her approaching death, but rather to lament over her permanent virginity and the resultant extinction of her father's line, since she was his only child" (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p. 165).

The UCG Bible Reading program adds, "How then are we to understand Jephthah's vow? The Hebrew of verse 31 is the source of the difficulty—or rather, the *translation* of the Hebrew text is the source of the difficulty. The next phrase could just as well be translated, "...shall surely be the Lord's, *or* I will offer it a burnt-offering." *The Nelson Study Bible* notes, "The conjunction in Jephthah's pivotal statement in v. 31, that whatever or whoever came out of the door 'shall be the Lord's, *and* I will offer it up as a burnt offering' could be translated *or*. Thus, if a person came out first, he would dedicate that person to the Lord, or if an animal came out first, he would offer the animal as a burnt sacrifice..."

"Yet it still appears that the vow was rash and unwise. Jephthah had apparently not thought this through well enough. He was shocked and deeply grieved that his daughter was the one who came out to meet him, stating that this had brought him very low (11:35). He was clearly expecting it to be someone else—probably a household servant. No doubt, he learned a powerful lesson that day.

"Thankfully, as the evidence seems to support, Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter—he devoted her to the service of God, much as did Hannah devote Samuel to the service of God. As such, Jephthah's daughter would remain a virgin as she served at the tabernacle as part of a special class of dedicated women (compare Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22; Luke 2:36-37). It appears that they acted as door porters,

singers, musicians and workers in cloth (most valuable and needed when the tabernacle stood, as it did in Jephthah's day). This dedication meant that Jephthah would have no grandchildren—for his daughter was his only child—and thus no heir. As we know, the Israelites viewed barrenness as a stigma, and for the family line to end was considered virtually a curse from God.

"Now becomes very clear the grief of Jephthah (for he would have no inheritor) and of his daughter (for she would have no children) and of her friends and of the people of Israel (for their hero would not leave them descendants and his name would "perish out of Israel")! It is interesting to note the contrast between Jephthah and the judges immediately before and after him. They both had 30 sons (Judges 10:3-4; 12:8-9), while Jephthah had just this one and only daughter.

"As a final observation, we must note verse 39 again. The sacred historian records that Jephthah 'carried out his vow with her which he had vowed' and then adds, 'she knew no man.' It is not recorded that Jephthah *sacrificed* her—that is apparently a conclusion based upon an incomplete understanding of the above scriptures. The writer of Hebrews, then, is vindicated for including Jephthah in the heroes of faith. Though Jephthah was evidently rash and unwise in making his vow to start with, he nevertheless obeyed God's command to pay one's vows to Him (Deuteronomy 23:21-23), even when it was to his own hurt (Psalm 15:4).

"In that sense, Jephthah's fulfilling of his vow may be seen as a real act of faith! He was willing to give up his only hope of grandchildren and perpetuation of the family line, enduring a social stigma, in order to obey God. Why? Because he looked forward to the promises that he had seen and embraced (Hebrews 11:13), which would be bestowed in that country of God (verse 14) when he would be raised in that better resurrection (verse 35)! Truly, then, Judges 11 reveals Jephthah to be, in the end, a courageous man of integrity, faith and vision!"