

Perspective Digest

Volume 16
Issue 2 *Spring*

Article 6

2011

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Recommended Citation

Bauer, Stephen (2011) "Jephthah and the Grace of God (The President's Desk)," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol16/iss2/6>

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The President's

DESK

Stephen Bauer

Jephthah and the Grace of God

By Stephen Bauer

The appearance of Jephthah in Hebrews 11 presents an interesting conundrum for the Bible student. Why did the author of Hebrews (whom I accept as Paul) highlight a man as a heroic example of faith to be emulated when he seems to have offered his daughter as a human sacrifice? In short, what did the author see in Jephthah's story that merited his inclusion in the all-star list of faith heroes found in Hebrews 11?

For those less familiar with Jephthah, his story is found in Judges 10–11. In short, Israel had been unfaithful yet again and, thus, had fallen under the abusive dominion of the Philistines and Ammonites for 18 arduous years (10:6-9). During an Ammonite attack, the people of Israel decide to repent to regain God's blessing. God seems to question how genuine the repentance is, but the people make significant reforms anyway. Battle lines are formed, and war appears about to erupt (vss. 10-18). It is in this setting that Jephthah appears in the story.

Judges 11 describes Jephthah as a prostitute's illegitimate son and mighty warrior. Furthermore, Jephthah was disowned

from any portion of the family inheritance by the “legitimate” sons of their common father. Jephthah fled from his brothers and became a gang leader, making his living by raiding, hence developing the warrior skills (11: 1-3). Like most gangs, however, it seems likely his raids were against fellow Israelites and not against foreign enemies, perhaps in revenge for his disenfranchisement from legitimate society. Jephthah clearly charges the elders of Gilead with driving him out (vs. 7). Perhaps these elders were his brothers, who earlier were credited with forcing him to flee (vss. 2, 3), but it seems likely that a good portion of the elders were not so closely related. Hence, Jephthah was disenfranchised from the entire tribal unit, not just from his blood family.

A prostitute’s son leading a gang in criminal behavior would not seem to be a likely candidate for God to use in His service. Certainly, some better candidates must have been available! Furthermore, Jephthah appears to vow to offer a human sacrifice and to follow through with it.

In light of these facts, one might be tempted to wonder if the author of Hebrews was in his right mind to list Jephthah as a hero of faith.

I shall not here survey the divided scholarship on the topic, for I believe most scholars have missed the point of Hebrews 11. I propose, rather, that this chapter uses the story of Jephthah in a similar manner to Paul’s use of Abraham’s faith in God’s promise of a son/descendants in Romans 4. (This similarity of usage would not be surprising to anyone who accepts Paul as the author of Hebrews.) In Romans 4, Paul takes a single aspect of Abraham’s life—his belief in God’s promise of an heir and descendants (Gen. 15:6)—and uses it as an analogy to how we believe on Christ for justification. Paul waxes quite idyllic when he argues that Abraham never wavered in faith because of his old age and that he was fully convinced God would do what He

promised (Rom. 4:18-21).

The alert reader may wonder how Paul can use such lofty language about Abraham's never doubting the divine promise when also considering Abraham's union with Hagar. I suggest that for Paul, the central concern was that Abraham never wavered over *if* God would give him the son and descendants. It appears to have been inconsequential to Paul's point that Abraham faltered over *how* the promise would be fulfilled. Paul thus builds his doctrine of righteousness by faith on Abraham's unwavering faith relative to the "if" dimension of the promise, using this one element of Abraham's life and experience as an archetypal example as the basis for the doctrine of righteousness by faith. In like manner, the author of Hebrews seems to have in mind one portion of Jephthah's life that best exemplifies the life of faith he is trying to illustrate. I propose that the passage about Jephthah's battle preparations, as well as the ensuing battle, is what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he cited Jephthah in chapter 11.

In this story, Jephthah first sent messengers to the Ammonite king, inquiring why they were attacking the Israelites (Judges 11:12). The Ammonite king answered to the effect that Israel stole land from Ammon during their exodus from Egypt and asks Jephthah to restore that land peaceably (vs.13). Jephthah gives a lengthy response, rehearsing that exodus history and an unprovoked attack by the Amorites. This sets up Jephthah's core rebuttal to the Ammonite king, namely that Yahweh had dispossessed the Amorites of the land now being disputed by Ammon (vss. 14-23) and gave it to Israel. Israel thus has this land by divine grant and thus has a legal right to possess it.

Jephthah closes his message by asking if Ammon really intends to take what was assigned to Israel by Yahweh. In a seeming chide, he wonders if the king of Ammon should only possess land that his god, Chemesh, gives him, while asserting

that Israel will possess what Yahweh gave to them (vs. 24). He finally asserts that Israel had possessed the land under dispute for 300 years (vs. 26) and wonders why the complaint was not made sooner.

Jephthah thus framed the issue as a conflict between Yahweh and Chemesh, citing examples from Israel's history in which Yahweh defeated the other gods and their associated nations (vss. 25-28). More critically to the theology of Hebrews, based on a 300-year-old grant from Yahweh, Jephthah went into battle expecting victory, even though the Ammonites had dominated Israel for 18 years. Jephthah attempted the impossible because he believed Yahweh would enforce the grant, and God gave the victory. As in Romans 4, this single act of faith seems to be what underlies the citation of Jephthah in Hebrews 11.

In Hebrews 11, the author is concluding an appeal to first-century believing Jews, trying to convince them to persevere in their faith and not give up on Jesus. As part of this appeal, the author applies Habakkuk 2:3 to the Second Coming in order to set up the argument that Jesus is coming and has not tarried, implying that these harried Jewish believers can hang on till He gets here. The author continues by using Habakkuk 2:4 to outline two responses to this unseen promise: "The just shall live by faith"; or "shrink[ing] back" (Heb. 10:38, NIV). Here, as in Habakkuk, "the just shall live by faith" is not primarily about how we are justified but, rather, focuses on choosing to live a lifestyle in which behavior is governed by faith in God's promises, even if the promises are unseen. The Hebrews could not see Jesus coming in glory but needed to persevere anyway as if they could see Him coming.

Hebrews 11 is a catalog of examples of persons acting on an unseen promise that God eventually fulfills. Noah had never seen a flood (vs. 7) but built an ark anyway because God made a promise. And so it is with each character. Thus, Jephthah's going

into battle against Ammon, with 18 years of visible oppression at their hands, yet trusting an ancient, unseen promise that God fulfills, fits the theological purpose of the chapter. Events afterward are not important to the theological development of the archetypal point, just as with Paul's use of Abraham, who believed God yet later lied to Abimelech. In contrast to Abraham, however, Jephthah seems to have been a fairly unsavory character.

Jephthah's moral anomalies fit well, however, into the larger trajectory of the Book of Judges. The book depicts a strong moral decline after Gideon's central confession that God, not Gideon, is to rule over Israel as king (Judges 8:22, 23). Starting with Gideon's ephod becoming an idolatrous snare, almost every judge thereafter has something wrong revealed about him.

Abimelech tries to be a king and gets killed. Several judges live like kings with harems, hence the large number of sons (two with 30, one with 40). And then there is Samson.

Jephthah's rash vow and fulfillment is simply another evidence of the moral decline that occurs when God is not functionally king in Israel. Yet in that darkness, not unlike the story of Esther, Jephthah the outlaw invoked the promise of God, put it on the point of his spear, and went into battle trusting God to keep His promise. And God did.

Jephthah, then, teaches us about not only how faith works but also about God's grace. When this ancient outlaw turned to God in faith, God did not hesitate to respond favorably. His unsavory past was not held against him. Though cast off by his half-brothers, Jephthah was graciously received by God. Whenever sinners trust God's word more than their perceptions and feelings, grace erupts and they become empowered in the ways of God. Jephthah thus exemplifies another truth expressed by the author of Hebrews: "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him" (Judges 7:25, ESV).