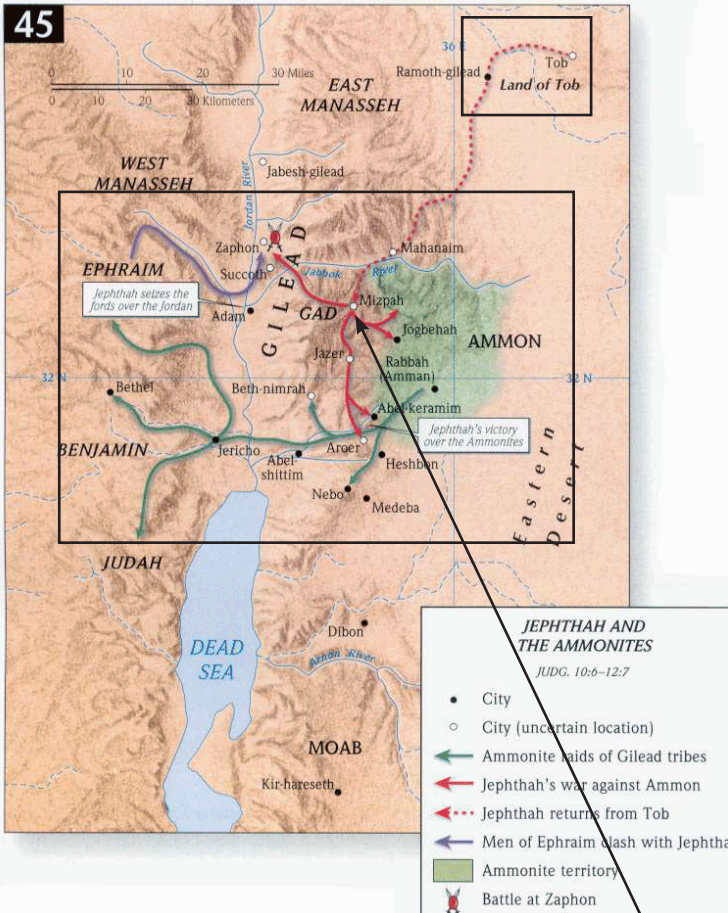


Israelite people was historical confirmation of these spiritual principles. Thus any reaching back to the past should be done through this perspective, if it were to provide explanation of their captivity and offer hope for eventual deliverance from this horrible situation. For these spiritual leaders of exiled Jews, Israel's history provided both warning and hope. Strict obedience to God's Law was the key to divine blessing. In it lay hope to someday return back home to Jerusalem and the Land of Promise. God's willingness to forgive and restore in the past was the foundation for this hope. Even in the darkest period of Israel's past, from Joshua to Samuel, one could find these divine principles at work.

Internal History. Inside the Jephthah story, Judges 10:6-12:7, a number of time and place markers surface. Typically the stories of the judges center on the enemy group(s) used by God as punishment for the "evil Israel did in the sight of the Lord" accusation. Mostly, these ethnic groups came from the territory surrounding the land of Canaan, usually from the east. Also, typical is the identification of the Israelite tribal group(s) that receive the bulk of the oppression from these enemies. Additionally, the deliverer judge will come from one of these oppressed tribes. The deliverance will culminate with a decisive battle driving out the enemies.

This pattern holds true in the Jephthah story. The oppression of the Israelites centered on the region along the east bank of the Jordan River, known as Gilead, the tribe of Gad's territory (10:8). But additionally incursions were made into the western area in the tribal regions of Benjamin, Ephraim, and Judah (10:9). These are in the central and southern sections of the Land of Promise. In typical fashion, Jephthah emerges out of Gilead as the deliverer of the Israelites.

The enemies, who were the source of oppression in this instance, are identified as the Philistines and the Ammonites (10:7). Although the Philistines



are identified in 10:7 as oppressors, they quickly fade into the background as the story focuses on the Ammonites as the main enemy to be crushed by the deliverance. The Philistines lived on the western territories along the Mediterranean coastal region. Thus their attacks of the Israelites came from the west, while the Ammonites lived east of the Jordan River and east of the land of Gilead. In the prologue listing of all the enemies of Israel,

the "five lords of the Philistines" are mentioned in 3:3. But the Philistines won't become major players in the oppression of the Israelites until toward the end of the period of the judges, particularly with Sampson.

Jephthah's home was at Mizpah (11:34), east of the Jordan River. Of the several towns with this name, Mizpah of Gilead (11:29) is the reference in our passage. John Muilenburg ("Mizpah," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach) provides this description:

Mizpeh of Gilead (מצפה גלעד; Gen. 31:49; Judg. 10:17; 11:11, 29, 34; Hos. 5:1[?]). While the topographical clues are meager in the Genesis context and rather obscure in Judges, it is clear in the former that Jacob is moving S toward the "mountain of Gilead" (Gen. 31:21, 25; הר הגלעד; RSV "hill country") and only later crosses the Jabbok. Many proposals have been made for the identification of the site: Ramoth-gilead; Suf, a locality near Jerash (Conder); and especially Jebel Jel'ad (De Vaux, Kraeling). Glueck is doubtless correct, however, in insisting upon a region in N Gilead, both for the scene of the covenant in Genesis and for Jephthah's home and base of operations.

After a bitter quarrel concerning Jacob's flight from Paddan-aram, Laban proposed a covenant between them (Gen. 31:43-55). The event was solemnized by the erection of a pillar (*maççebâ*) and by a heap of

stones. The word *maçcebâ* has fallen out of the text in vs. 49, because of its similarity with “Mizpah,” and is correctly supplied by the RSV (for מצפה the Samar. reads מצבה). The two covenant makers called the cairn the “heap of witness,” Laban in his native Aramaic, Jacob in Hebrew (גל ער). But the pillar was named Mizpah (i.e., “Watchpost”), in memory of Jacob’s words: “Yahweh watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.” The story is plainly etiological, and the words probably become the hieros logos of a sanctuary.

At the time of Jephthah the Ammonites mobilized their forces in order to drive out the Israelites from Gilead (Judg. 11:1). The Israelites pleaded with Jephthah to be their leader against the foe. The Israelites were encamped at Mizpah, and there they entered into a bond with Jephthah, sealed significantly with the words: “Yahweh will be witness between us” (ביןנו; lit., “hearer between us”; Judg. 11:10; cf. Gen. 31:44, 48, 52). The cultic language is clear, notably in vs. 11: “Jephthah spoke all his words before Yahweh at Mizpah.” The Spirit of Yahweh fell on him, and under its power he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and on to Mizpah. When he returned to his home at Mizpah, he was greeted by his daughter and was compelled to fulfil his terrible vow by sacrificing her. Hos. 5:1 may well refer to this Mizpah of Gilead.

When Jephthah was summoned to meet with the Gileadite leaders he came “from the land of Tob” (11:5). After having fled his home he had taken refuge in this region NE of Gilead in Syria. For exact location, see the map on the preceding page. After being made military leader, he returned to his home in Mizpeh.

In Jephthah’s defeat of the Ammonites, he pushed the battles “from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim” (11:33). The map on the preceding page identifies the location of these towns in the Ammonite territory. They covered a substantial part of the western terri-

tory of the Ammonites.

The conflict with the men from Ephraim took place at Zaphon (see map), which is located just east of the Jordan River in the river valley and north of the Jabbok River that flows westward into the Jordan. S. Cohen (“Zaphon,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach) provides the following depiction:

A city of Gad, situated N of Succoth (Josh. 13:27). The name probably indicates that it was a shrine of Baal-zephon, one of the chief Canaanite deities. It appears in Egyptian records of the Nineteenth Dynasty as dapuna; it is mentioned in one of the Amarna letters as Sapuna, and as the residence of a princess known as the “lady of the lions,” who appeals to the Pharaoh of Egypt for help. After Jephthah had defeated the Ammonites, the Ephraimites crossed the Jordan and encamped near Zaphon, where they assailed Jephthah for not having called them to participate in his campaign; a battle ensued, probably near the place, and the Ephraimites were trounced (Judg. 12:1-6). A clan of Gad, the Zephonites (Num. 26:15) or Ziphionites (cf. Gen. 46:16), seems to have taken its name from the city.

The site of Zaphon has been identified as Tell el-Qos on the N side of the Wadi Rajeb, which commands a rich sweep of valley lands and is close to the N-S road along the valley. It is also sufficiently far from the fords of the Jordan to fit the narrative in Judg. 12:1.

The time markers in the Jephthah story are mostly the typical references found in the cycle of stories. The foreign oppression of the Israelites lasted 18 years before deliverance came (10:8). Once deliverance was complete Jephthah “judged Israel 6 years” before his death (12:7). The other time marker, unique to the Jephthah story is the two months time for wandering in the mountains that Jephthah gave his daughter before executing her (11:38-39). This is followed by mention of an annual Israelite tradition to mourn the death of this young girl for four days (11:40).

b. Literary

Genre. The style of narrating the Jephthah story is in line with the other stories. The fourfold retributive approach to history serves as the framing for the story.

Jephthah cycle: 10:6-12:7

1. Israel sins

10:6 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, worshiping the Baals and the Astartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Thus they abandoned the Lord, and did not worship him.

2. God punishes

10:7 So the anger of the Lord was kindled against

Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, 8 and they crushed and oppressed the Israelites that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites that were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead.

3. Israel cries out to the Lord

10:10 So the Israelites cried to the Lord, saying, “We have sinned against you, because we have abandoned our God and have worshiped the Baals.”

4. God delivers

10:16 So they put away the foreign gods from among them and worshiped the Lord; and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer.

12:7 Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in his town in Gilead

As typifies the other stories, so also here the focus of attention is on the deliverance aspect of the cycle: 10:17-12:7.

1. Israel sins. (10:6) The accusation against the Israelites contains not only the formula declaration, "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," but extends to define the evil as both idolatry and abandonment of God. **2. God punishes** (10:7-9). God's anger prompted Him to sell the Israelites "into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites." The impact is defined in terms of these enemies crushing and oppressing the Israelites "that year." Then the oppression continued for 18 years. It focused on the Gileadites living on the east side of the Jordan River. But intrusions were made across the Jordan westward into the territories of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim. **3. Israel cries out to the Lord.** (10:10). Here the text atypically specifies acknowledgement of sin by the Israelites: "We have sinned against you, because we have abandoned our God and have worshiped the Baals." At first God rejects their expression of repentance (10:11-14): "therefore I will deliver you no more." The collective Israelite response reflects remorse (10:15-16a). They accepted God's refusal and went about getting rid of their idols while renewing worship of God.

4. God delivers. 10:16b: "and he [God] could no longer bear to see Israel suffer." The deliverance phase (10:16b-12:7) takes on traits distinctive to just the Jephthah story.

Literary Setting. Our passage, 11:29-40, represents one episode inside the deliverance segment of the larger Jephthah story. This can be charted out as follows:

10:16 So they put away the foreign gods from among them and worshiped the Lord; and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer.

Scene 1: 10:17 - 11:11, who will lead the Israelites against the Ammonites?

10:17-18, the dilemma of finding a leader

11:1-3, Jephthah, the banished son of a prostitute

11:4-11, securing Jephthah as leader

Scene 2: 11:12 - 12:6, war with enemies

11:12-28, Jephthah's confrontational messages to the king of the Ammonites.

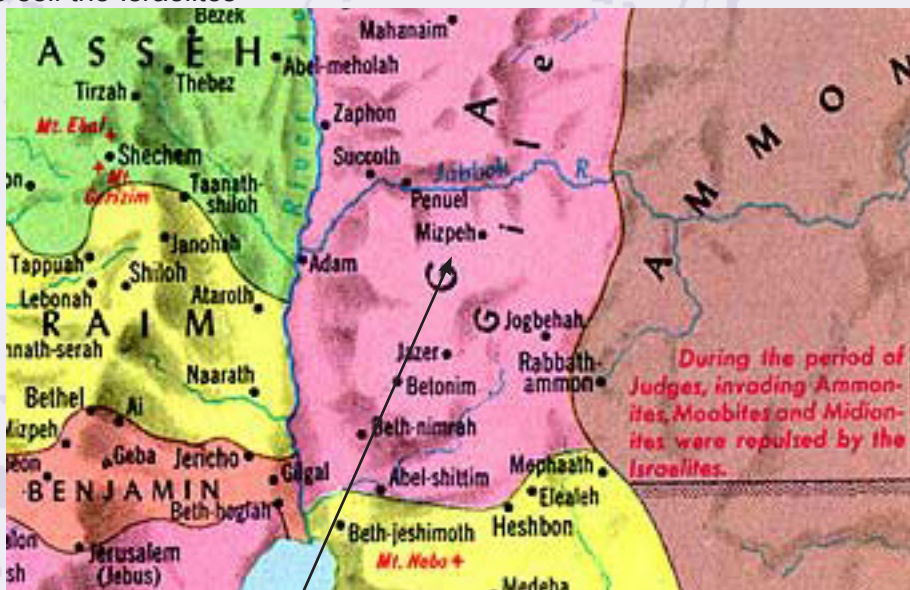
11:29-33, Jephthah defeats the Ammonites, while making a vow to human sacrifice

11:34-40, the sacrifice of his only daughter

12:1-6, confrontation with the Ephraimites

12:7, Jephthah's death

7 Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in his town in Gilead



With battle eminent the Israelites gathered at Mizpah after the Ammonites moved into southern Gilead (10:17-18), but the Israelites were without a worthy leader to command their armies.

At this point the narrative jumps back in time in order to set the stage for the Israelite leaders to approach Jephthah. Jephthah was the product of a union of his father Gilead with a prostitute (11:1-3). As such he was considered unworthy to live in the family and was eventually driven out by the son's of Gilead's wife. Banished from his home (in Mizpah we learn latter), he took refuge in the far northern land of Tob where he became an "outlaw" leader making raids on area villages.

After this brief background excursion, the narrative resumes with the request to Jephthah by the Israelite leaders to command their armies in battle against the Ammonites (11:4-11). After haggling with them over some details, Jephthah agreed on two conditions: 1) they had to bring him back home to Mizpah in honor, and 2) the Lord had to give victory. The Israelite leaders agreed to make him leader and so he returned back home and was officially installed

as military commander over the Gileadite army.

Jephthah's first action was to attempt to negotiate a peace agreement with the king of the Ammonites (11:12-28). The first effort ended in failure (11:12-13). So he tried a second time (11:14-28) which also ended in failure.

Our passage, 11:29-40, describes the victorious battle against the Ammonites, but almost as a side note. The central emphasis is upon the crazy vow that Jephthah makes if God will grant victory.

With the victory crushing the Ammonites, they no longer become a threat to the Gileadites (11:33): "So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel."

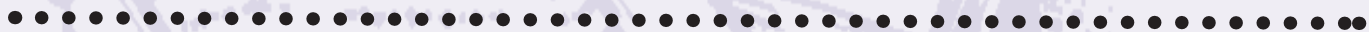
The narrative (12:1-6) shifts to focus on the Ephraimites who were late comers to the battle and thus lost out on the plundering of the defeated Ammonites. They threaten to burn down Jephthah's house in retaliation even though Jephthah reminds them that they had their chance to be involved from the beginning but chose not to. Jephthah gathered

a sizeable force of Gileadite soldiers and they took control of the crossing points of the Jordan River. Whenever the Ephraimites who had crossed over to the east side at Zaphon attempted to retreat back across the Jordan heading home to Ephraim in the central hill country, they were cut down by the Gileadite army. 42,000 of them were killed this way.

Curiously, the Ephraimites -- also Israelites like the Gileadites -- were identified by their language deficiencies. When the Ephraimites came to the river to cross it, they were asked, "Are you an Ephraimite?" Answering "No," the Ephraimite was then told, "Then say Shibboleth." Because of dialectical shifts in Hebrew between the two tribes, the Ephraimites would say "Sibboleth" instead of "Shibboleth" thus giving themselves away. The meaning of the Hebrew word is unclear, but the word was chosen because of the difficulty of pronouncing it correctly from the Gileadite system of pronunciation of Hebrew. Thusly exposed the Ephraimite would be killed.

II. Message

Literary Structure. The internal literary structure of 11:29-40 is simple. 1) In preparing for war Jephthah makes a rash vow to the Lord (vv. 29-33), and 2) then tragically has to execute his daughter in order to keep his vow (vv. 34-40).



a. Making a vow without thinking, vv. 29-33

LXX	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p>²⁹ καὶ ἐγένετο ἐπὶ Ἰεφθαε πνεῦμα κυρίου καὶ παρήλθεν τὸν Γαλααδ καὶ τὸν Μανασση καὶ παρήλθεν τὴν σκοπιὰν Γαλααδ εἰς τὸ πέραν υἰῶν Ἀμμων ³⁰ καὶ ἠΐξαστο Ἰεφθαε εὐχὴν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ εἶπεν ἂν διδοὺς δῶς τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἀμμων ἐν τῇ χειρὶ μου ³¹ καὶ ἔσται ὁ ἐκπορευόμενος ὃς ἂν ἐξέλθῃ ἀπὸ τῆς θύρας τοῦ οἴκου μου εἰς συνάντησίν μου ἐν τῷ ἐπιστρέφειν με ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἀπὸ υἰῶν Ἀμμων καὶ ἔσται τῷ κυρίῳ ἀνοίσω αὐτὸν ὀλοκαύτωμα ³² καὶ παρήλθεν Ἰεφθαε πρὸς υἱὸς Ἀμμων παρατάξασθαι πρὸς αὐτούς καὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς κύριος ἐν χειρὶ αὐτοῦ ³³ καὶ ἐπάταξεν αὐτούς ἀπὸ</p>	<p>29 Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon. 30 Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, 31 then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." 32 So</p>	<p>29 Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He 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 whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." 32 So Jephthah crossed over to the Am-</p>	<p>29 At that time the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he went throughout the land of Gilead and Manasseh, including Mizpah in Gilead, and led an army against the Ammonites. 30 And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, 31 I will give to the LORD the first thing coming out of my house to greet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." 32 So Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites, and the LORD gave him victory. 33 He</p>

Αροερ ἕως ἐλθεῖν ἄχρις
Αρνων ἐν ἀριθμῷ ἑξήκοσι
πόλεις καὶ ἕως Εβελχαρμιν
πληγὴν μεγάλην σφόδρα
καὶ συνεστάλησαν οἱ υἱοὶ
Αμμων ἀπὸ προσώπου υἱῶν
Ισραηλ



Notes:

This first segment describes the war with the Ammonites, but places the rash vow as the centerpiece declaration. It can be visually depicted as follows:

29 Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. . . . 32 So Jephthah

30 And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 31 then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering."

crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. 33 He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

Absent verses 30 - 31, the text would read as a typical military battle with a victorious outcome for the Israelites. But the insertion of the vow in the middle of the narrative dramatically draws attention to itself as the center piece of the narrative unit. We will examine these two units separately.

The battle narrative, vv. 29, 32-33, begins with the first indication that God had anything to do with Jephthah being an divinely approved deliverer of the

Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. 33 He struck them with a very great slaughter from Aroer to the entrance of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel.

monites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. 33 He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

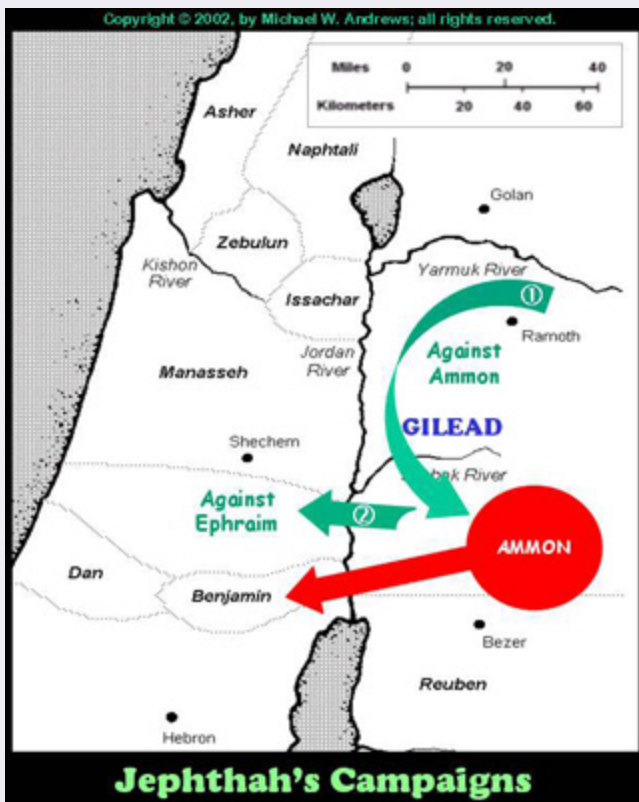
thoroughly defeated the Ammonites from Aroer to an area near Minnith, twenty towns, and as far away as Abel-keramim. Thus Israel subdued the Ammonites.

Israelites: "the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah..." The significance of this is highlighted in the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Logos Systems):

When the Spirit of the Lord is attached to any activity in Judges, it is usually to the calling up of an army. In a tribal society with no centralized government, it was difficult to get other tribes to stand with one or two that might be facing problems. The measure of a leader in such situations was his ability to compel others to follow even though he had no office of command over them. In Israel this was a mark of the power of Yahweh, for it was he alone who had the authority to call out the armies of the tribes. Yahweh was the only central authority. It was therefore a clear indication of the Lord's authority at work in someone when they exercised authority that was only Yahweh's by calling out the armies (see Judg 11:29; 1 Sam 11:6-8). This was one of the distinguishing features of the Judges of Israel.

In gathering his army Jephthah drew soldiers from the Israelite territory east of the Jordan where the tribes of Manasseh and Gad occupied the land. He traveled through this region rousing up the people to support the war effort against the Ammonite oppressors.

Once the army had been collected, Jephthah led his soldiers into Ammonite territory to engage them in battle. Although the exact location of Aroer, and Abel-keramim is not known for certain, the text clearly indicates that the Ammonites suffered a massive defeat at the hands of the Israelites. The map on page 2 attempts to identify the approximate location of these sites. Jephthah's skills, honed down as a leader of an outlaw gang, proved significantly helpful as a military commander on the battle field. God's role in this is simply stated as "the Lord gave them into his hand" (11:32b) and alludes to Jephthah's battle field skills.



Jephthah's Campaigns

Jephthah's vow, vv. 30-31, stands as the most memorable part of this episode. D.A. Carson (*New Bible Commentary*, Logos Systems) has an interesting perspective on this:

Vows, as such, were not unusual (e.g. Nu. 30; Ps. 22:25; Ec. 5:4-5). But this was no ordinary vow. It explicitly pledged a burnt offering (31b) but did not specify the victim, only the means by which it would be identified: 'whatever [or whoever] comes out ...' (31a). The wording was ambiguous, and put all the inhabitants of Jephthah's house at risk. To our horror, and his, it was his virgin daughter, his only child, who became the victim (34-35), and the real tragedy is that such a vow was totally unnecessary (as previous episodes have shown). In context it can be seen as nothing other than a mistaken attempt to bargain with God. Jephthah the master negotiator overplayed his hand and paid a tragic price. The second half of this episode reads like a grim inversion of Gn. 22, the story of another father and another only child. But Jephthah was no Abraham, and in his case there was no voice from heaven, only a punishing silence. We can only conclude that the Lord was as angry with Jephthah's vow as he was

with Israel's 'repentance'. Cf. the action of the king of Moab in 2 Ki. 3:26-27. It is worth considering how often modern prayers contain elements of bargaining with God. Jephthah's example makes it clear that God is not to be bargained with in this way.

What Jephthah did in so far as a vow was concerned wasn't unusual, for military generals all across the ancient world, even into NT times, would make vows to their god at the start of warfare. Even the Israelites often did this. The strange aspect is the content of Jephthah's vow. The pledge was outside the bounds prescribed in the Law, as J. L. Mays (*Harper's Bible Commentary*, Logos Systems) describes:

Some commentators have argued that he may have had in mind an animal, but both the language and the nature of a vow (namely, an extreme measure that would ordinarily entail the offer of something quite precious) suggest that a person was meant.

The Hebrew Bible generally condemns human sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10; but see also Gen. 22; Exod. 22:29-30; and Mic. 6:7-8), and the actual biblical examples of the practice, which are few, view it with horror (see 2 Kings 3:27; 16:3; 21:6).

What can we learn from these verses that applies to our day? Some positive aspects can possibly be seen. For one thing, Jephthah's success was dependent on God's approval and blessing. Also encouraging is that God could use an outlaw bandit, son of a prostitute to deliver His people from oppression.

The dark side of this episode is the bizarre vow. What ever possessed Jephthah to make such a promise to God is mind boggling. Some commentators have tried to water down the promise by suggesting that he had in mind sacrificing an animal, not a human. Others have tried to interpret this as though his daughter was to be consecrated as a perpetual virgin in dedicated service at a worship center for the Gileadites. But the plain meaning of the text reflects an assumption of human sacrifice, as reflected in the NRSV: "whoever comes out..." If Carson is correct in his reading of this text, then we have a case of attempted bargaining with God gone array. At minimal, Jephthah represents what can go crazy when we are ignorant of the principles of God given in sacred scripture. In both his and our cases, "ignorance of the law is no excuse."

b. Having to keep such a vow, vv. 34-40

LXX
³⁴ καὶ ἦλθεν Ἰεφθαε εἰς Μασσηφα εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ θυγάτηρ

NASB
 34 When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter

NRSV
 34 Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was

NLT
 34 When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter -- his

αὐτοῦ ἐξεπορεύετο εἰς ὑπάντησιν ἐν τυμπάνοις καὶ χοροῖς καὶ ἦν αὕτη μονογενής οὐκ ἦν αὐτῷ ἕτερος υἱὸς ἢ θυγάτηρ ³⁵ καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς εἶδεν αὐτὴν αὐτός διέρρηξεν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ καὶ εἶπεν ἃ ἃ θυγάτηρ μου ταραχῆ ἐτάραξάς με καὶ σὺ ἦς ἐν τῷ ταραχῶ μου καὶ ἐγὼ εἰμι ἥνοιξα κατὰ σοῦ τὸ στόμα μου πρὸς κύριον καὶ οὐ δυνήσομαι ἐπιστρέψαι ³⁶ ἢ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν πατέρ ἥνοιξας τὸ στόμα σου πρὸς κύριον ποιήσόν μοι ὄν τρόπον ἐξήλθεν ἐκ στόματός σου ἐν τῷ ποιησαί σοι κύριον ἐκδίκησιν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου ἀπὸ υἱῶν Ἀμμων ³⁷ καὶ ἦδε εἶπεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα αὐτῆς ποιησάτω δὴ ὁ πατήρ μου τὸν λόγον τοῦτον ἕασόν με δύο μῆνας καὶ πορεύσομαι καὶ καταβήσομαι ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη καὶ κλαύσομαι ἐπὶ τὰ παρθενία μου ἐγὼ εἰμι καὶ αἱ συνεταιρίδες μου ³⁸ καὶ εἶπεν πορεύου καὶ ἀπέστειλεν αὐτὴν δύο μῆνας καὶ ἐπορεύθη αὐτὴ καὶ αἱ συνεταιρίδες αὐτῆς καὶ ἔκλαυσεν ἐπὶ τὰ παρθενία αὐτῆς ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη ³⁹ καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τέλει τῶν δύο μηνῶν καὶ ἐπέστρεψεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα αὐτῆς καὶ ἐποίησεν ἐν αὐτῇ τὴν εὐχὴν αὐτοῦ ἦν ἠῤῥατο καὶ αὐτὴ οὐκ ἔγνω ἄνδρα καὶ ἐγένετο εἰς πρόσταγμα ἐν Ἰσραὴλ ⁴⁰ ἀπὸ ἡμερῶν εἰς ἡμέρας ἐπορεύοντο θυγατέρες Ἰσραὴλ θρηνεῖν τὴν θυγατέρα Ἰεφθαε Γαλααδ ἐπὶ τέσσαρας ἡμέρας ἐν τῷ ἐνιαυτῷ

was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one *and* only child; besides her he had no son or daughter. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot take *it* back." 36 So she said to him, "My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon." 37 She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions." 38 Then he said, "Go." So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity. 39 At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel, 40 that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; 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 She said to him, "My father, if 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 given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites." 37 And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I." 38 "Go," he said and sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. 39 At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that 40 for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

only child -- ran out to meet him, playing on a tambourine and dancing for joy. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes in anguish. "My daughter!" he cried out. "My heart is breaking! What a tragedy that you came out to greet me. For I have made a vow to the LORD and cannot take it back." 36 And she said, "Father, you have made a promise to the LORD. You must do to me what you have promised, for the LORD has given you a great victory over your enemies, the Ammonites. 37 But first let me go up and roam in the hills and weep with my friends for two months, because I will die a virgin." 38 "You may go," Jephthah said. And he let her go away for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never have children. 39 When she returned home, her father kept his vow, and she died a virgin. So it has become a custom in Israel 40 for young Israelite women to go away for four days each year to lament the fate of Jephthah's daughter.



Notes:

What should have been a joyous celebration of victory over the long time enemies of God's people quickly turned into disaster for Jephthah. His only child, a daughter, came out of his house to greet him in celebration of the victory. At that moment, Jephthah realized the foolishness of his promise to God, for now he was obligated to sacrifice his only child. Although ignorant of the perimeters of vow making in the Law of Moses, he did know that when vows were made to deities they had to be kept no matter what the cost. This was universal custom in that world. And it was a principle in the Law of Moses as well: "Nothing that a person owns that has been devoted to destruction for the Lord, be it human or animal, or inherited landholding, may be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord" (Lev. 27:28).

His daughter's response reflects deep character on her part (11:36): "My father, if 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 given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites." She became a willing sacrifice in order to protect her father's integrity and his promise to the Lord.

She had one request of him before he sacrificed her (11:37): "Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I." To us such a request may seem strange. The commentators in the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Logos Systems) suggest the following as probably in the background of this request:

In Canaanite mythology from Ugarit (Baal and Mot) the virgin goddess Anat roams the hills mourning for lost fertility, since Baal is dead. The motif of roaming the hills for lost fertility is therefore a possible connection with Jephthah's daughter's request. In early Mesopotamian practice it was the god Dumuzi (Tammuz), the "quickener of the child in the womb," who had died and was lamented. The time period of two months likely correlates with one of Israel's "seasons." The Gezer calendar (tenth century) divides the year into eight periods: four of two months' length and four of one month's length. The second two-month period (for sowing) consisted of winter months when concerns about fertility would be most prominent.

Whether such was a driving force in her request can't be determined with certainty, although the detailed mentioning of the deep influence of Canaanite gods on the Israelites in the Jephthah story certainly lends credence to this possibility. At best, she was mourning the fact that she would never give birth to children, something very critical to a woman's sense



of worth in that world. And something emphasized by the text itself (11:39b): "She had never slept with a man." At the end of the two months she returned to her father and was sacrificed as her father had pledged. The story closes on a positive note indicating that out of this came an Israelite annual tradition of commemorating her death for four days by the "daughters of Israel."

Relevance to our day? That's hard to say. The maxim, "the chickens will come home to roost," comes to mind. Jephthah's foolish and unnecessary promise to God brought him profound sadness in the end. How often do our foolish actions come home to roost in our lives? For Israel and for us, this story reminds us of the seriousness of promises made to God.



LXX

²⁹ καὶ ἐγένετο ἐπὶ Ἰεφθαε πνεῦμα κυρίου καὶ παρήλθεν τὸν Γαλααδ καὶ τὸν Μανασση καὶ παρήλθεν τὴν σκοπιὰν Γαλααδ εἰς τὸ πέραν υἰῶν Ἀμμων ³⁰ καὶ ἠΐξατο Ἰεφθαε εὐχὴν ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ εἶπεν ἕαν διδοὺς δῶς τοὺς υἰοὺς Ἀμμων ἐν τῇ χειρὶ μου ³¹ καὶ ἔσται ὁ ἐκπορευόμενος ὃς ἕαν ἐξέλθῃ ἀπὸ τῆς θύρας τοῦ οἴκου μου εἰς συνάντησίν μου ἐν τῷ ἐπιστρέφειν με ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἀπὸ υἰῶν Ἀμμων καὶ ἔσται τῷ κυρίῳ ἀνοίσω αὐτὸν ὀλοκαύτωμα ³² καὶ παρήλθεν Ἰεφθαε πρὸς υἰοὺς Ἀμμων παρατάξασθαι πρὸς αὐτούς καὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς κύριος ἐν χειρὶ αὐτοῦ ³³ καὶ ἐπάταξεν αὐτούς ἀπὸ Ἀροερ ἕως ἐλθεῖν ἄχρις Ἀρμων ἐν ἀριθμῷ ἑκοσι πόλεις καὶ ἕως Εβελχαμμιν πληγὴν μεγάλην σφόδρα καὶ συνεστάλησαν οἱ υἱοὶ Ἀμμων ἀπὸ προσώπου υἱῶν Ἰσραηλ

³⁴ καὶ ἦλθεν Ἰεφθαε εἰς Μασσηφα εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτοῦ ἐξεπορεύετο εἰς ὑπάντησιν ἐν τυμπάνοις καὶ χοροῖς καὶ ἦν αὕτη μονογενὴς οὐκ ἦν αὐτῷ ἕτερος υἱὸς ἢ θυγάτηρ ³⁵ καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς εἶδεν αὐτὴν αὐτὸς διέρρηξεν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ καὶ εἶπεν ἂ ἂ θυγάτηρ μου ταραχῆ ἐτάραξάς με καὶ σὺ ἦς ἐν τῷ ταραχῶ μου καὶ ἐγὼ εἰμι ἠνοιξα κατὰ σοῦ τὸ στόμα μου πρὸς κύριον καὶ οὐ δυνήσομαι ἐπιστρέψαι ³⁶ ἡ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν πάτερ ἠνοιξας τὸ στόμα σου πρὸς κύριον ποιήσόν μοι ὄν τρόπον ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ

NASB

29 Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon. 30 Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, 31 then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." 32 So Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. 33 He struck them with a very great slaughter from Aroer to the entrance of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel.

34 When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one *and* only child; besides her he had no son or daughter. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have

NRSV

29 Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He 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 whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." 32 So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. 33 He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

34 Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back

NLT

29 At that time the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he went throughout the land of Gilead and Manasseh, including Mizpah in Gilead, and led an army against the Ammonites. 30 And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, 31 I will give to the LORD the first thing coming out of my house to greet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." 32 So Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites, and the LORD gave him victory. 33 He thoroughly defeated the Ammonites from Aroer to an area near Minnith, twenty towns, and as far away as Abel-keramim. Thus Israel subdued the Ammonites.

34 When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter -- his only child -- ran out to meet him, playing on a tambourine and dancing for joy. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes in anguish. "My daughter!" he cried out. "My heart is breaking! What a tragedy that you came out to greet me. For I have made a vow to the LORD and cannot take it back." 36 And she said, "Father, you have made a promise to the LORD. You must do to me what you have promised, for the LORD has given you a great victory over your

στόματός σου ἐν τῷ ποιῆσαι σοι κύριον ἐκδίκησιν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου ἀπὸ υἰῶν Ἀμμων ³⁷ καὶ ἴδε εἶπεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα αὐτῆς ποιησάτω δὴ ὁ πατήρ μου τὸν λόγον τοῦτον ἕασόν με δύο μῆνας καὶ πορεύσομαι καὶ καταβήσομαι ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη καὶ κλαύσομαι ἐπὶ τὰ παρθένιά μου ἐγὼ εἶμι καὶ αἱ συνεταιρίδες μου ³⁸ καὶ εἶπεν πορεύου καὶ ἀπέστειλεν αὐτὴν δύο μῆνας καὶ ἐπορεύθη αὐτὴ καὶ αἱ συνεταιρίδες αὐτῆς καὶ ἔκλαυσεν ἐπὶ τὰ παρθένια αὐτῆς ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη ³⁹ καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τέλει τῶν δύο μηνῶν καὶ ἐπέστρεψε πρὸς τὸν πατέρα αὐτῆς καὶ ἐποίησεν ἐν αὐτῇ τὴν εὐχὴν αὐτοῦ ἣν ἠῴξατο καὶ αὐτὴ οὐκ ἔγνω ἄνδρα καὶ ἐγένετο εἰς πρόσταγμα ἐν Ἰσραὴλ ⁴⁰ ἀπὸ ἡμερῶν εἰς ἡμέρας ἐπορεύοντο θυγατέρες Ἰσραὴλ θρηνεῖν τὴν θυγατέρα Ἰεφθαε Γὰλλαδ ἐπὶ τέσσαρας ἡμέρας ἐν τῷ ἐνιαυτῷ

given my word to the LORD, and I cannot take *it* back.” 36 So she said to him, “My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.” 37 She said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions.” 38 Then he said, “Go.” So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity. 39 At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel, 40 that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

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29 וַתְּהִי עַל־יַפְתָּח רוּחַ יְהוָה וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־הַגִּלְעָד וְאֶת־מְנַשֶּׁה וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־מִצְפָּה גִלְעָד וּמִמִּצְפָּה גִלְעָד עָבַר בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן³⁰ וַיֵּדֶר יַפְתָּח נֶדֶר לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־נָתַן תַּתֵּן אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן בְּיָדִי

31 וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדֹּלְתַי בֵּיתִי לְקִרְאָתִי בְּשׁוּבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם מִבְּנֵי עַמּוֹן וְהָיָה לַיהוָה וְהָעֲלִיתָהּ עוֹלָה פ
32 וַיַּעֲבֹר יַפְתָּח אֶל־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן לְהַלְחֵם בָּם וַיִּתְּנֵם יְהוָה בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּכְּסֵם מִעֲרוּעֵר וְעַד־בּוֹאֵף מְנִית עֲשָׂרִים עוּר וְעַד³³ אֲבָל כְּרָמִים מְכָה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד וַיִּכְּנְעוּ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן מִפְּנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פ

34 וַיָּבֵא יַפְתָּח הַמִּצְפָּה אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וְהִנֵּה בָתוֹ יֹצֵאת לְקִרְאָתוֹ בְּחַפְזִים וּבְמַחְלוֹת וְרַק הָיָא יְחִידָה אֵין־לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בֶן אִוֶּבֶת וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹתוֹ אוֹתָהּ וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲהָ בָתִּי הֲכָרַע הֲכָרַעְתָּנִי וְאַתְּ הָיִית בְּעֶכְרִי וְאַנְכִי פְּצִיתִי־פִי אֶל־יְהוָה וְלֹא אוֹכַל לָשׁוּב

36 וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲבִי פְּצִיתָה אֶת־פִּיךָ אֶל־יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה לִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִפִּיךָ אַחֲרָי אֲשֶׁר עֲשֵׂה לָךְ יְהוָה נִקְמוֹת מֵאִיבֶיךָ מִבְּנֵי עַמּוֹן

37 וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־אֲבִיהָ יַעֲשֵׂה לִּי הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה הֲרַפָּה מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁנַיִם חֲדָשִׁים וְאֹלְכָה וַיִּרְדְּתִי עַל־הַהָרִים וְאֶבְכָּה עַל־בְּתוּלֵי אֲנָכִי (וְרַעִיתִי) [וְרַעוֹתַי]

38 וַיֹּאמֶר לָכִי וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתָהּ שְׁנֵי חֲדָשִׁים וַתִּלְךְ הָיָא וְרַעוֹתֶיהָ וַתִּבְרַךְ עַל־בְּתוּלֵיהָ עַל־הַהָרִים

39 וַיְהִי מִקֶּץ שְׁנַיִם חֲדָשִׁים וַתֵּשֶׁב אֶל־אֲבִיהָ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ

אֶת־נֶדְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר נָדָר וְהָיָא לֹא־יִדְעָה אִישׁ וַתְּהִי־חַק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מִיָּמָיוּ | יְמֵימָה תִּלְכְּנָה בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְתַנּוֹת לְבַת־יַפְתָּח הַגִּלְעָדִי אַרְבַּעַת יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה ס