

Jephthah - Encounter with Ammon

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[0 : 0 0] well friends let's pray almighty God and loving father may the words that I speak now be from you may they be faithful to your scripture may they be faithful to your son and may you graft our word into your hearts and work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works and we pray this for the honour and praise of your name through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen well friends I want to begin by getting you to think back to funerals you have attended you know the funerals I mean funerals of family funerals of friends funerals of strangers now as you do so I wonder have you ever been to a funeral where the person in the casket went to hell I haven't you see I've never been to a funeral where someone had the courage to say well in the end we all know the truth

John was a scoundrel an upstart an adulterer and a God hater we all know it and God knows it and today he's receiving what he deserves do you know what that means it means that funerals are often full of bad theology theology as we know is a study of God and of his ways now theology can be good and theology can be bad and today we're going to meet a man who uses both in almost the same breath his name is Jephtar we just read about him and now did you notice his theology did you notice as we read through the text what was theologically solid and did you notice what was theologically suspect maybe just as we're looking now just scan the reading again see if you can spot it as we get underway we need to remember where we are perhaps you remember the story in chapter 10 Israel seems to get into the normal pattern of things that is they sin God hands them over to a foreign aggressor however the focus then falls on a group of Israelites in the Transjordan that is on the east side of the Jordan they are Gileadites now I put a map on the data projector so you can envisage just where we're talking about because I think with a map it does help you understand some of what's going on anyway the Israelites cry out to God they acknowledge their sin

God tells his people that he's fed up with their sinfulness he's not going to save them but they throw themselves with gusto into repentance they beg God to save them but God's response as we saw is ambiguous you see in chapter 10 verse 16 we don't really know whether he's going to save them or not nothing specific is mentioned about his actions we don't know Israel doesn't know God doesn't raise up a hero that is a judge and so the Gileadites who are under threat from the Ammonites look around for someone amongst their own midst that is they look for a deliverer themselves they don't wait for God they do it themselves and last week we saw them find one he is an unlikely suspect because he is the son of a Gilead man and of a disreputable woman perhaps a prostitute he's been thrown out of his family by his brothers he's landed up with a bunch of other empty men that is landless men I think however he's a mighty warrior with a sharp intellect and cunning negotiation skills and last week we saw him use these to great advantage with the Israelite elders and as a result he's ended up as their head and a potential deliverer and that's where we get to in verse 12 of chapter 11 so let's see what he gets up to today open your Bibles follow with me now remember Jephthah was brought on for a specific job to take on the Ammonites and in verse 12 he gets down to work immediately he goes to the source of the problem look at verse 12 he kicks off his negotiations with the king of Ammon via a messenger as one did in those days and it appears that he at least wants to pursue settling things peacefully even so his approach is somewhat confrontational and hard-nosed he doesn't leave much room for negotiation he's a leader in charge and he approaches the king of Ammon head to head but notice something notice that he does not name the king he stands up you see for his people as a leader and as one of them and he straightforwardly disputes the rights and actions of the king of Ammon our version of the Bible has him starting in this way now what do you have against me and more literally he says what to me and to you in other words what's the big deal between me and you what's the issue between me and you this is clearly personal isn't it he is man to man head to head and then he brings the charge what is the issue between me and you that you have attacked my country in fact the original language has it stronger than this it literally says what is the issue between you and me that you have attacked my land now the term land is very theologically important for Israelites and the charge is clear

Ammon has engaged in inappropriate aggression against a neighbour gone you see now is Gilead's compliance which we saw last week gone is their fear in the face of a superior enemy now they've got a man of steel to make a stand for them and he's off to a good start isn't he but look at the next verse it's clear that the king of Ammon is no wimp himself you see he's an able sparring partner for Jephthah and he says when Israel came up out of Egypt they took away my land from the Anon to the Jabbok all the way to the Jordan now give it back peaceably now have a look at your map this is what we know of Palestine or the Levant now up until up at the top we know is the Sea of Galilee down toward the bottom is the Salt or Dead Sea they are joined you'll see and you know by the River Jordan now notice that there are three rivers flowing into the Jordan or the Dead Sea that come from the east of the Jordan now up at the top just below the Sea of Galilee is the Yarmouk in the middle is the Jabbok and then flowing into the Dead Sea is the Anon now let's go through what the king of Ammon says and let's have a look at his view of history as it's portrayed in these verses one he knows that Israel came up out of Egypt and entered into the promised land from the east that is from the Transjordan that is they came up around the back and they came in from the east two his claim is that when they entered the Transjordan they robbed the Ammonites of the territory between the Anon and the Jabbok right down to the Jordan River three he demonstrates this conviction by replying to Jephthah's use of my land by using it himself he says when Israel came up out of Egypt they took away my land you see where the dispute is don't you and then he concludes this is point number four therefore

Gilead should give it back peacefully now I should tell you that like many politicians there's some license taken with the truth here after all the facts are that the Ammonites never occupied this section of land oh it is true that their land is connected with the Jabbok River it forms something of a border to their land we can see that in Deuteronomy 3.16 and Joshua 12.2 it's also true that Ammon had joined with Moab and Amalek back in Judges 3 they had participated in the success of those nations in defeating and subjugating Israel to some extent however claiming that Ammon stretched as far south as the Anon might indeed be stretching things and so the notion that the border of Ammon came anywhere near the Jordan even if it was true that Ammon did make occasional forays to the Jordan even crossing it as we see in Judges 10 verse 9 but asking Israel to give back something that Ammon never owned is a very big ask now let's look at how Jephtar responds to this look at verse 14 he sends messengers back to the Ammonite king his speech is long it's remarkably formal and sophisticated in argument let's look at it the first thing that Jephtar does is to urge the king of Ammon to get his history correct look at verse 15 just as prophets say thus says the Lord so the messengers of Jephtar say in what is a prophetic tone thus says Jephtar you see Jephtar is speaking directly to the king of Ammon through this his messengers and he is forthright if not somewhat prophetic straight up front he gives what amounts to a thesis statement can you see it there he says thus says Jephtar to the king of Ammon

[8 : 56] Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites you see he's clear categorical the king of Ammon has his history wrong and explains this in verses 16 and 17 but when they came up out of Egypt Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh 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 can you see what's being said Jephtar is saying look Israel respected the land rights of both Edom and Moab they asked permission to pass through their land it was denied and Israel respected this they circled around Moabite and Edomite land but notice verse 718 with its passing rebuff of the king of Ammon's claim he says Jephtar says they did not enter the territory of Moab for the Anon was its border did you hear it you see the Anon was not Ammon's border it was Moab's border the very key basis for the king of Ammon's claim is spurious now look at verses 19 and 20 further history surveyed since they had to avoid

Moab and Edom that is because Israel did not want to take someone's land rights and so on Israel turned to the Ammonites for help and they asked the Ammonites if they could pass through Ammonite territory but as you'll know if you've read earlier on you'll notice that you'll remember that their king Sihon responded by bringing out his army to attack Israel given this provocation the Lord the God of Israel gave Sihon and all his army into Israelite hands and that's what Jephtar says in verse 21 that is they took over Ammonite lands they captured all of it from the Anon to the Jabbok that is the very land that the king of Ammon is saying belongs to him and his people was conquered by Israel the point being made is that Israel had no interest in the land under dispute they simply wanted to pass through and cross the Jordan into the promised land but because of the Ammonite objection or resistance to them they ended up with it but they only ended up with it because Sihon insisted on marching out against them now Jephtar's point is a potent one you see the king of Ammon should actually remember that he should take heed he should learn from history you see when Israel came into the land they did try to deal with Sihon diplomatically and peacefully but Sihon the Amorite didn't believe it so he took on Israel and he lost and the Lord delivered the Amorites into Israel's hands so friends it's been rather extended but this is part one of Jephtar's response he has surveyed history he's made three points one and sorry on each of those three points the king of Ammon should learn from point one

Israel did have respect for territorial boundaries of the incumbents of the land when it was not part of the land that the Lord had actually promised to them point two when his people are forced to go to war because of the aggression of other peoples the Lord will assist and defend his people point three the Ammonites have no claim on the land in question contrary to what the king of Ammon says the Ammonites have absolutely no historical claim he rendeth the first lesson the second lesson comes from theology and it's mounted in verses 23 and 24 look at it with me the historical argument has three parts it did have some theological aspects to it but now Jephtar turns more solidly to theology and his theological argument has two parts look at verse 3 the theological logic is clear first since it was the Lord who had driven the Ammonites out before his people

Israel that land belongs to the Lord's people Israel Ammon has no rights over it the Lord is the God of Israel Israel is his people and this thought drives us the second theological point and it is this just as the Lord gives things to his people so the Ammonites must be satisfied with what they received from their God Chemosh now friends what do you think of Jephtar's theology do you think at this point he is correct do you think he's right well I'm not sure that I do you see just because someone expresses a theological view in the Bible does not mean that it is true we know that from Job's friends don't we we also know it even from the New Testament when Jesus argues with the religious authorities I'm not sure that I think Jephtar well I'm sure that I think Jephtar is not in the right I think he was on good and solid ground in his history but I'm not so sure he's an able theologian look at verse 24 the first sign

I think that he's flawed theologically is that he hasn't even got the God of Ammon right you see the national deity of Ammon was not Chemosh Chemosh is actually the national deity of Moab not Ammon but there's more I wonder if you spotted it look at verse 24 again Jephtar says will you not take what your God Chemosh gives you now first he seems to assume that Chemosh is real in the same way as the Lord is second he seems to assume that Chemosh has the power to give land in the same way as the Lord does both are false assumptions for an Israelite to make or false conclusions for an Israelite to make you see Jephtar is like many Christians he takes theological arguments from the world or from other faith and he and sort of transposes them on biblical faith no Christians are wrong when they do that and Jephtar is wrong when he does it Israelites know that there is but one God and Israelites know that God oversees every nation on earth it is he alone who gives and takes away

[15 : 27] Deuteronomy 2 verse 19 says that it was the Lord who gave the land of Ammon to the sons of Lot for a possession Deuteronomy 2 verse 21 says it was the Lord who gave the land of Ammon to the Ammonites and then chapter 2 verse 22 says it was the Lord who drove out the Horites from the land he gave to the Edomites now you see Jephtar's just plainly wrong it may seem like a logical argument it might help his argument logically but is not theologically sharp it is not theologically faithful to God's truth outlined in the book of Deuteronomy Jephtar is not sharp as a theologian or faithful or orthodox at this point now it's best we recognise this right now you see if we recognise it now it'll help us understand what he does in the very next section of the book of Judges anyway having said that let's return to his final statement verse 24 even if his logic and theology are flawed the final statement is true whatever the Lord our God has given us we will possess now let's turn to the final part of

Jephtar's argument and let's remember what he's arguing he's arguing against the king of Ammon he's arguing against Ammon's right to the land of Gilead to the land Gilead is occupying he has argued from history from theology now he tends to argue from precedent let's look at what he does verse 25 first he refers to Balak son of Zippor now Balak was a Moabite king he lived east of the Jordan during the time of Moses as Israel was coming into the promised land he tried to stop them by hiring a prophet a very well-known prophet for most readers of the Bible called Balaam and he hired Balaam to curse Israel and it horribly failed Balaam ended up you might remember blessing rather than cursing Israel but Balak the king of Moab certainly didn't take on the

Israelites he didn't fight and quarrel with them he tried some other things such as Balaam and so on and tried I think some other mechanisms as well but he didn't actually take them on in battle and in doing so he set a precedent that the king of Ammon should observe and take note of and that brings Jephtar to his final argument look at it verse 26 he notes Israel has been here in this plot of land for 300 years if the argument being posited by the king of Ammon is that this is really Ammonite territory why then has it taken 300 years for the Ammonites to get around to claiming it in war surely the answer is that they have no right to claim it either peaceably or in war now look at verse 27 Jephtar wraps up his argument he claims he's innocent he has not wronged the king of Ammon rather he claims that the Ammonites are wronging him by waging war and then he pulls out his big guns just as he called on the

Lord to oversee when he was arguing with the so he calls on the Lord again here look at his final declaration let the Lord the judge decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites now it seems that Jephtar's final court of appeal is not the Ammonite king at all no it is the Lord and in verse 28 we hear the voice of the narrator and what he does is he takes us back to the king of Ammon and like many who have their hearts set on war argument does not prevail for look at what the text says the king of Ammon paid no attention to the message Jephtar had sent him so friends there we have the story what can we make of it well let's step back a bit let's see what we can learn from here let's assess what we've learnt from Jephtar you see Jephtar may be smart he may be a great warrior he may be a skilled negotiator however he is still very human so first of all what does

Jephtar get wrong as a human being what does he get wrong well we saw what he got wrong didn't we he got his theology wrong he got some very basic theology wrong in that he got the primary god of the Ammonites wrong that's not such a bad thing you can imagine it's fairly easy to do I guess most of you wouldn't know who the god of the Ammonites was it's not an easy it's not a hard thing to do it's easy to get such things wrong but that's not the fundamental mistake he made he made a greater mistake than this the greater mistake was that he put the lord on the same level as Chemosh now he may just have been playing with logic but the logic was flawed for it denied God's sovereignty it denied what God's word clearly said and Jephtar ought to have seen this he ought to be more careful you see bad theology can have devastating impact we'll see this as I said before next week now if you like you can read on before next Sunday and check it out for the next section of the book of

[20 : 47] Judges involving Jephtar contains one of the very dark and confusing moments in the book of Judges but let's now turn to some brighter things let's think about what Jephtar gets right what does he get right well you see although Jephtar is not completely correct as a theologian he is correct in one thing that he says he's also correct in his disposition you see he is a man who is for the Lord he is for God's purposes he does fight for God's purposes he does struggle for the good of God's people he does struggle against the enemies of God's people he does attempt to avert war by negotiation he does know that it is the Lord who will be the judge friends Jephtar is one of a bunch in all of this you see he's this odd mix of good and bad he's not perfect he is a flawed man flawed theologically flawed morally as we'll see flawed in many ways however he knows that behind him stands one who is not flawed and he's willing to appeal to him behind him he knows stands an unflawed judge behind all the other judges we meet in this book there stands a perfect judge he is the

Lord his existence his actions his judgments will determine history will determine the future of his people look at the second half of verse 27 again Jephtar puts everything in the hands of this Lord I have not wronged you he says but you have done me wrong by waging war against me let the Lord the judge decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites I think this is Jephtar's best moment in this debate it's not a moment of revenge it is just a simple expressed faith in God that he will sort things out and judge friends such is the faith of all God's people it's the faith we Christians believe in we who are Christians cling to this it is a great truth you see we know that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ 2 Corinthians 5 10 Jesus is our judge will be our judge

God has appointed him the judge of the world John 5 22 and 27 through Jesus God will one day judge the world he will judge the living and the dead through all history and he will give to each one what is their due for what they have done in their lives whether good or evil and that judgment will be righteous it will be just it will be impartial Prince do you believe this do you believe that God is your judge and that Jesus will be your judge on the last day Jephtar believed that God would judge in his own time do you believe that God was judge do you for friends let me tell you that whether you believe it or not God promises that he is the judge and he will do judging he is a judge and he will judge through his son he will judge me and he will judge you as

Paul says in Acts 17 God has fixed a day when he will judge the world in righteousness by a man he has appointed friends I am not talking about God giving you a favorable verdict in a battle against this or that now as Jephtar was no I'm talking about a far more significant time I'm talking about the ultimate truth projected from what Jephtar states theologically here you see there is someone before whom you and I must give an account and that he will judge us according to how we have responded to his son whether we have received him or whether we have rejected him and on that day he will bring to light what is hidden in the darkness expose our belief but as 1 Corinthians 4 verses 3 to 5 says also expose the motives of our hearts friends

God will be our judge too and remember he will judge us according to how we have responded to his son so if there's one take home message for you today it is this given that God is the judge how will he judge you on this day on this day when he will bring to light what is hidden in the darkness and expose the motives of the heart let us pray father we acknowledge today that you are our judge and that you have appointed Jesus to be our judge on the last day father we come before you and we cast ourselves upon your son knowing that you have fixed this day on which you judge the world in righteousness by the man you have appointed the Lord Jesus Christ father we we know that we will only be acquitted on that day as we trust in your son please help us to live lives of trust in him father we pray this in

[26 : 31] Jesus name amenitates to Thank you.